



DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL CLEAVAGE IN INDIA

**ETHNOGRAPHY OF RIOTS, EVERYDAY POLITICS AND
COMMUNALISM IN WEST BENGAL C. 2012–2021**

Suman Nath



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This book explores the emergence of identity politics and violence at the forefront of political life in an Indian state. Through a close reading of everyday politics in West Bengal, India, which until recently boasted of the longest-serving elected communist government in the world, the volume presents unique observations on Indian politics and its trajectories.

One of the first ethnographic studies of religious polarisation and its interface with politics in West Bengal, this book:

- Offers a fresh perspective, both theoretically and empirically, by using longitudinal, multi-site ethnography, to explain the mechanisms by which identity issues have re-emerged;
- Studies key policy changes, political practices and series of invented traditions during periods of political transition;
- Examines intricate details of the micro-dynamics of the formulation and expansion of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism and their political counterparts, which carry a capacity to push away secular, democratic forces from the existing political spectrum;
- Sheds light on the mechanisms of riots, its design, organisational bases and mechanisms of spread;
- Includes key observations from the 2021 elections in the state.

The volume will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of political science, social and cultural anthropology, sociology and South Asian studies.

Suman Nath teaches anthropology as Assistant Professor at Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Government College, Kolkata, India. He did his PhD jointly under faculties from the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and the University of Calcutta, India, in Anthropology. Since 2007, he has been researching issues of politics of resource allocation, which includes a stint as Research Associate at Public Policy and Management Group, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India. His books include a monograph, titled *People-Party-Policy Interplay in India* (2020), a co-authored volume on *Sexuality, Identity and Health* (2014), and *Theory, Policy, Practice: Development and Discontents in India*, a collection of essays co-edited with Debraj Bhattacharya (2022). He has also published in international journals on issues of politics, corruption and governance. He was awarded to participate in different research programmes organised by the UNDP, Planning Commission and SaciWATERs. Apart from his academic publications, Suman runs a couple of internationally recognised blogs and writes popular articles in Little Magazines and Bengali dailies.



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Ethnography of Riots, Everyday Politics and
Communalism in West Bengal c. 2012–2021

Suman Nath

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To

My friends at Aamra Ek Sachetan
Prayas Forum

and

In the memories of Susmita Roy Choudhury – you have
been larger than life, and way too larger than death.



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PREFACE

I began writing this preface a few weeks before the Assembly election 2021. I had to listen to the disturbing loudspeaker announcements and orchestrated hatemongering of the political parties, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Trinamool Congress (TMC) to each other. Each of them sought support and appeared softer towards the Left Front people cordially calling them *Bampanthi Bandhura* (friends from the Left Front). TMC tried to put some emphasis on the work they have done: governance and service delivery; BJP almost entirely focused on Hindu/Muslim polarisation – something which was both ontologically and epistemologically absent from Bengal mode of politics for decades until 2014–2015. BJP/TMC polarisation aligning often with the Hindus and Muslims, respectively, prepared to fight an election. Such political and religious polarisation successfully percolated everywhere to bring out identity politics at the central position in the political discourse of the state. My childhood friends, united by social media, especially at the WhatsApp platform are divided and fighting each other for the political parties. Some of my friends are still keeping their faith for the Left Front and appreciate their efforts in finding out educated youngsters as their candidates. Most of the others are radically fighting each other taking either the BJP's side or the TMC's side. The most prominent “structural” mechanism in action is the question of identity. Bengal is now embracing identity politics like it did never before. While TMC is “labelled” as the Muslim appeaser, BJP being a political wing of Hindutva, my friends and many others are disappointed to see Left, Congress alliance with the newly formed Indian Secular Front led by one of the Muslim religious leaders, *Pirzada Abbas Siddiqui*. Some said that the alliance is not serious about desisting Hindutva and BJP brigade, and for some others, it has torn apart the secular “mask” of the Congress and Left which they kept wearing since Independence. The result shows that TMC has secured a comfortable third term in the Assembly securing more than 200 seats out of 294 and BJP has become the official opposition. While people in Bengal, especially those who tried to desist the expansion of BJP, is in the mood for celebration, they fail to see that BJP has secured 77 seats from 3 in their last Assembly election

and the only seat that Left, Congress Indian Secular Front alliance has managed to win is won by Naushad Siddiqui, of the Indian Secular Front. It is a clear symptom of an extreme form of identity polarisation in West Bengal. Clearly, the “secular” forces are facing serious handicap to curb out a space in the existing political spectrum. This election can be seen as a decisive one for the people of Bengal and people have decided to vote against BJP. Though as I will show, the election result doesn’t mean that Bengal has voted against the growing communalisation. It simply means that Bengal is yet to become completely entangled with identity politics – a process working on a fertile ground of Hindu–Muslim violence by dismantling the secular democratic forces. This book was written during the Covid-19-led lockdown period. Right now, we are probably experiencing Covid-19 at its highest peak and people in India are going through unforeseen tragedies to die simply because hospitals have run out of their capacity. Covid-19 is unmasking the crippling public health infrastructure of the country, including West Bengal. The identity polarisation in 2020 didn’t even spare this infectious disease. Communalisation of this disease began with Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation that took place in Delhi’s Nizamuddin Markaz Mosque in March 2020. It was declared as a Covid-19 super spreader. “Corona Jihad” became a popular construct. Islamophobia took a new shape and we have witnessed a full-fledged riot in Telinipara, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. As I was doing my fieldworks, writing and rewriting chapters, West Bengal was heading towards an election, violence turned communal from partisan and mutual apprehension grew as it had never before. I knew we all knew that Bengal has never been like this.

During the heyday of Left rule, Bengal did have identity issues at grass-roots, but that could never challenge the party authority, let alone superseding it. I have written on the Left-led party hegemony, violent repression and control over the people for a considerably long duration. However, there is a change in the political practices and the public sphere, especially during the second term of the Trinamool Congress rule since 2016. All of a sudden there is a significant rise in the number of recorded riots. A proliferation of religio-cultural rituals like Janmashami even in remote villages, a rise in the number of Hanuman temples and saffron-clad Ram Navami rallies with Jai Shree Ram war cry surfaced the Hindutva politics. Similarly, there is an unforeseen aggression in the Muharram rallies, proliferation of Islamic Jalsa and a concentric attack on the relatively open and syncretic folk Islamic traditions by the Shariya Islam. What made this change possible? What made the “party”-based political mobilisation disappear? Why a primordial identity-based mobilisation did engulf the secular-democratic practices of the state? These were some of the puzzling questions that haunted me ever since I ended my previous book titled *People Party Policy Interplay in India* in 2019. These were not easy questions to answer. These questions pushed me to reach out and do intensive ethnographic research at places where

religious conflicts were at spur, especially since 2014–2015. I immersed myself into the everyday life of the people living in the riot-affected areas. Localised complex nexus of different stakeholders, their interface with the larger identity-based organisation networks and people's subscription to a particular form of political narratives became clearer. I began writing scholarly and popular articles and publishing fact-finding reports to document the series of events that brought back identity politics in mainstream Bengal politics. I was also feeling that several important and integral issues were missing in the three forms of writing that I was doing. The answer to this inherent feeling of something missing was a book. *Democracy and Social Cleavage* is about tapping macro and micro issues of primordial identity in democratic partisan politics. It attempts to make sense of how the two interfaces and alters everyday politics in West Bengal. It is also about narratives, phenomena and events as they unfold at places where communal riots have taken place. The book doesn't only look at the after-effects of the riots but explores identity consolidations as they happen over time through multi-site ethnography. This is not a classic anthropological ethnographic monograph that attempts a holistic description of a culture but this book is an outcome of my interaction with people who are directly affected and are at the same time perpetuated identity consolidation in a variety of ways at different corners of the state. *Democracy Social Cleavage* explores the coeval nature of Hindu and Islamic polarisation, their organisational mechanisms, political counterparts and their cross-boundary impacts. It doesn't only describe the phenomenon but also attempt a theorisation of democracy, social cleavage interfacing politics at both micro and macro levels, both at structural policy level and in everyday practices. Although the ethnographic work that resulted in this book is done within West Bengal, this book maps core concepts and parameters to reflect on the nature of political practices in India. It tracks the commonalities of fundamentalism at both organisational and practice levels and offers concepts that can be used in explaining similar issues elsewhere. This book is not only an attempt to address the change in the political practice from party organisation to identity organisation but more importantly it also addresses some of the fundamental changes in the socio-cultural fronts that might dictate much of the future of the state in the coming years.

Suman Nath
July 2021, Kolkata

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Writing as I always say is a lonely process and it often becomes a one-way communication with facts, figures, field notes, memories and photos. It was Sreejith K., who kept encouraging me and helping me in writing by reading my manuscripts and giving critical feedback to them. Sreejith da

was equally enthusiastic about this book and I am appreciating his effort in this book from deep inside of my heart. My other friends at Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Government College like Pranabes, Mintu and Sootrisa are a constant source of inspiration to continue working when the entire system encourages us to stop somewhere in the middle. Those moments of love and laughter will never be forgotten. My fellow participants of “Research Cravers” WhatsApp group of the college like Riddhi, Shaona, Ritwik, Sinjini, Sujata and Kaushik have been constant sources of energy to keep the research mind alive. I deeply appreciate Debraj Bhattacharya for keeping my confidence boosted especially during the testing times. A special thank to Anwesa Sengupta, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, for writing on the partition-led riots and for sending me some of the articles that I needed badly. I am thankful to journalists like Sourjya, Devparna and Swati for critically engaging with the issues of identity politics in West Bengal. I thank Snigdhendru Bhattacharya and Sambit Pal for writing fantastic journalistic accounts on the issues of political change in West Bengal. Joseph Allchin deserves big thanks from my end for giving me a brilliant opportunity to learn about the Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. I am deeply indebted to all the free platforms for getting academic resources and as a person to Prateek Vijayavargia for all those magic moments when I could access the resources otherwise locked. My special thanks to National Library, Kolkata and B.C. Roy memorial Library, IIM Calcutta for the resources and help that I received from them. I am thankful to organisations like Karwan e Mohabbat, Centre for Study of Society and Secularism and Association for Protection of Democratic Rights for the kind of work they do and the help they have extended whenever it was needed.

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Finally, I thank my wife Anwita and son Arjak for adding meaning to life in an otherwise meaningless hodgepodge world in which we are living. I am indebted to my parents and to my father-in-law for shaping me every day in many ways than I would ever be able to know.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAMRA	An Assemblage for Movement Research Association
AASJ	Anjuman Ahle Sunnatul Jamaat
AIKS	All-India Kisan Sabha
APDR	Association for Protection of Democratic Rights
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CAT	Common Aptitude Test
CPIM	Communist Party of India Marxist
CRPF	Central Reserved Police Forces
EPW	Economic and Political Weekly
ESI	Employees' State Insurance
GoWB	Government of West Bengal
IeS	Idara-e-Shariya
IIM	Indian Institute of Management
IT	Information Technology
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
LF	Left Front
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
PCPA	People's Committee against Police Atrocities
PM	Prime Minister
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
TMC	Trinamool Congress
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
VHP	Viswa Hindu Parishad



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INTRODUCTION

1 Dangerous myths

There are coeval times that can run into strikingly different paces and directions. We can easily think about a couple of such times in West Bengal – first, the immediate time [we call it present] and second, the long-term, rather indefinite time [we sometimes call it eternal and historical] which often runs concealed under the first. These two often do not complement, and at present, West Bengal shows a parallel disjunction of the two. The immediate time during the heyday of Left Front (LF) Government prioritised party over everything else to form what is called “party society” (Bhattacharyya, 2009, 2016). The party machinery appeared quite robust in their three and a half decade of continuous rule. It virtually created a condition where people started to think party and government alike and took party-controlled governance for granted. I theorised it as a particular kind of “systemic misrecognition” (Nath, 2018, 2020a). An important implication of this immediate present is that party could supersede other competing primordial channels of public transactions including caste and religion. One of the lesser discussed successes of the LF era has been a significant downfall in the identity-linked conflicts and riots. Questions, however, remained. The uncomfortable questions are rarely asked. These include a) how far the partition and partition-linked riot memories have travelled vertically across generations? what does it mean to the present-day people of West Bengal (also in Bangladesh)? b) whether party society has actually pushed other issues back, especially the issues of identity? c) how permanent was it? d) how superficial was it? and e) to what extent Hindu–Muslim community boundaries are relevant? Or whether they have remained and have grown at a different pace, to a different direction, in a concealed way? To find out possible answers to these questions, we have a few ethnographic works. We also have the second category of long-term time to look at for seeking answers. For example, we can read Chatterjee’s (2017) account of the *Margins of Citizenship* as she described the *Muslim Experiences in Urban India* through her ethnographic work in the Park Circus, Kolkata. She unearths

how the communal boundaries are created and maintained. She traces the *demonisation* of the Muslims “as an abstract entity occurred in the city in the years immediately following Partition” (Chatterjee, 2017, p. 7). Similarly, in recent years, Roy (2014) mentions that she was advised not to stay in a Muslim household in a village in West Bengal because she was a Hindu by birth. If we look at the second category of long-term time, we can see that within a few years of Trinamool Congress’s (TMC’s) rule after the end of LF in 2011, the state experiences a sudden increase in the number of riots (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.1) and an upsurge of identity issues. This rise, as we will see, should be seen in the context of a) rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a political opponent of the state, b) lack of organisation building initiatives among the TMC and dismantling of LF grassroots organisations and c) increasing prominence of Islamic fundamentalism in the state. We will deal with these issues separately throughout the book, but before that, let me introduce you how the long-term, eternal time gets culturally ingrained.

All of us had subscribed to different false beliefs during our early childhood. Most of them now seem funny. Such false beliefs range from everyday fear with darkness to extraterrestrial ideas. A nagging baby will be made to believe that there is someone supreme, powerful watching from outside so that s/he follows the parent’s instructions. We the people in West Bengal commonly call it *Juju*. So the Juju will come if the baby refuses to eat, sleep or do not want to take bath. There is a popular song by the famous Bangla Band, *Chandrabindu* which elaborates the concept of *Juju* and its continuation even in the adulthood Bengali psyche. Children grow up believing that the moon and the sun are their maternal uncles. Wherever they go, the moon follows! They grow up, question, unlearn and learn other kinds of myths. These learning often remain unquestioned. These stronger myths add *distinction*, in now adults’ everyday life leading to class formation (Bourdieu, 1984). Such myths range from people’s expectations, ideals and choices. They shape much of what people see, how they see, what they believe, what they question and how they imagine themselves in the world in which they strive to live. With memories of partition-linked riots, West Bengal could never forget or even question dozens of popular myths like Muslims are uneducated and orthodox. I am yet to come across studies that supports or opposes this kind of belief system primarily because it is difficult if not impossible to even fetch data and prove or disprove a community’s religiousness and orthodoxy. It is rather easier to accept that members of a community are constituted by unique, self-contained, independent individuals having the capacity to make decisions which has a diverse range of variations. Some may be orthodox and some may be not. However, there are other kinds of myths against Muslims that can easily be countered. For example, two of the most frequently encountered myths are a) Muslims will outnumber Hindus in West Bengal because they have more children

and b) they are being appeased by the state. The first myth was dismantled by Chowdhury (2020). Using census data, he showed that the population growth rate among Muslims has become half between 2001 and 2011, while among the Hindus, it fell only about 23%. He also mentions that West Bengal Muslims have the highest fall in the fertility rate in India. The second myth has been systematically dismantled by Jaffrelot (2019) where he has shown that Muslims have increasingly been marginalised from the key politico-administrative positions over the years. Their representation nowhere matches their population representation in the country. Similarly, Muslims are made to believe that Hindus are consolidating to launch attack and because they are minorities, if they do not organise, they cannot defend themselves. They are told to avoid and hate those who practice idol worship that includes not only the Hindus but also the whole spectrum of Sufism.

West Bengal, as per the 2011 census, has a substantive Muslim Minorities which is about 27.01% and a Hindu Majority of 70.54%. There are Muslim predominant districts like Malda and Murshidabad. We grew up in 1990s West Bengal as high school kids and have heard the word secularism like an everyday given. Constitution has never been part of our education system, nor were we taught anything on history after the independence of the country in our schools. We, the celebrated Millennials, have nurtured a rather ahistorical, apolitical and consumerist self. Aided to this systematic ignorant education system-led (im)maturity, we are also encouraged not to study “arts and humanities” and embrace “science and technology” from our early childhoods. In addition to this, we are being told to avoid “politics” and concentrate on our “career” to reach some distant, utopian dreams. The formula of success was to study science, qualify for the joint entrance examination and become an engineer or if you are really a hardworking student, you can also become a doctor. An extension to this was to leave engineering when you have about five years of work experience and qualify Common Aptitude Test (CAT) and join an Indian Institute of Management (IIM) to become a management “professional.” In my IIM Calcutta days, I have seen such bright faces looking for enhancement of their aptitude to go back to an industry and earn more money. I have encountered people leaving highly paid, prestigious central government jobs and joining IIMs simply because they would be able to earn more. A large section of IIM graduates I was fortunate enough to interact with has a dream of becoming an entrepreneur. Apple story, Google story is not only inspiring but also replicable to them. Only an entrepreneur can make things happen like they want to. We the millennials are also the generation that couldn’t do “science” like we were expected to do; we were not apt to do humanities either, but we could finish our graduation only to become unemployed and to a certain extent unemployable. We fill a large section of the youth population of this country, aimless and jobless.¹ We, the “other” millennials, could not get a decent job but could afford to become hooked to our smartphones with the

cheapest data pack in the world. We the millennials form the youthful India, which is projected as one of the most successful experiments of Neo-liberal economics (Das, 2006, 2015; Aiyar, 2008). We are simultaneously enjoying the growth ride through our career achievements and increasing purchase power. We are also suffering because of an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor. While a section of millennials spends such an amount in an evening party that the other section cannot even think of earning in a year. What the Neo-liberal consumerist world does to the IIM graduates is starkly and shockingly opposite to what it does to those who couldn't climb the ladder, as nearly 800 million people of India live under \$2.00 per day (Ahmed et al., 2011). In 2020, India is occupying the 97th position among the 107 countries in Global Hunger Index (2020). Meanwhile, the employment scenario, especially in the non-farm sector, has shown a historic low at present. This is quite different from the overall trend in the recent past when non-farm employment was growing (Mehrotra and Parida, 2019).

What will be common among the two poles of the youths? In a hypothetical situation where these two can meet and talk, their conversation on politics will be commonly addressing the failures of the Lefts in West Bengal, the disappointment with the TMC and the possibilities with BJP. The point of departure for the last few years in such a discussion is the Hindu–Muslim divide revolving around the two myths which has successfully created a dominant and divisive narrative in the state. Nearly every night that I have spent with my colleagues in the Haldia Government College teachers' hostel for six and a half years had similar discourses revolving around. I have seen highly educated people, literally in love with data refuse to believe the official census records. This book is not written with an intention to find out the causes of such belief systems, nor does it attempt to deal with the adult myths. Rather this book will show the extent of impact of such carefully crafted and nurtured myths on the social fabric. This book explores how existing identity fault lines are being used by dominant political players to secure electoral gain at the expense of people's everyday life, using partition memories and riot-led traumas.

Myths, such as those that just have been discussed, carry a capacity to polarise the public sphere. These are to be seen in the context of India's regular experiences of religion–politics interface often having brutal outcomes (Chhibber and Petrocik, 1989) and an increasingly feeble real meaning of secularism. It is important to note that even with regular conflicts India's national institutions have remained largely stable till the 2000s (Varshney, 1998). One of the major reasons for such stability is the local and micro levels of such conflicts. However, Varshney (1998) argues that the Hindu–Muslim cleavage has the potential to split India. Guha (2016), referring to his conversation with Benedict Anderson, strongly argues that there is an uncomfortable question revolving around the very existence of India without partition based on Hindu–Muslim division. Indian constitution

promises a “secular” country, but scholars like Madan (1987, 2009) and Nandy (1998) have adequately discussed that the very notion of secularism is quite alien to the country. Thapar (2010) has clearly stated that secularism in opposition to religion focuses on Brahminical segment of Hinduism only. In consequence, there is a substantive lack of articulation of different religions in scholarly discussion on the secularism of the country. In India, what we experience can roughly be stated as a conflict between Congress’s accommodative secularism on one side and Hindu nationalism and communal ideology on the other. Hindu nationalism at present is on the rise as BJP with its Hindutva ideology came into the power in the 2014 Parliamentary election. It was apparent as Mr. Narendra Modi fought the election leaving his own state Gujarat and became Prime Minister (PM) from Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh – a symbolic city representing the rich history of Hinduism (Das et al., 2020). For Anand (2005), we need to see communal violence in the context of the debate over secularism. There are several broad themes of religious intolerance and cleavage in India. However, one of the most prominent justifications made by the Hindu nationalists about their wrath against the Muslims is the lack of reform in the civil code of the Muslims. It is often seen as Muslim appeasement of the Congress (Copley, 1993; Ganguly, 2003). From an anthropological point of view India being an essentially diverse country, such unification of codes is not only undesirable but also nearly impossible to implement. The issue, nevertheless, has remained as one of the key complications of existing cleavage. Apart from this, broadly speaking two dimensions come up repeatedly during the promotion of religious fundamentalism, first, an exclusive referencing to history including the distant and mythical past using what Thapar (2014, p. 3) says: “In contemporary times we not only reconstruct the past but we also use it to give legitimacy to the way in which we order our own society.” Such legitimacies are cultivated, invented and re-invented if we see them from the perspectives of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in the conception of “invented traditions.” The second issue is promotion of a particular understanding and subscription to the notion of Nationalism. Thapar et al. (2016, p. 11) note that “India has become the arena of struggle between the secular nationalists and those endorsing varieties of religious pseudo-nationalisms.” India in the recent past has seen a rise of both. Identities are consolidated through a variety of mechanisms – most exclusively by using the markers of earlier traditions and the spread of rumours resulting in an increased frequency of incidents like mob lynching (*Frontline*, 2017). At application level, the second dimension is often seen as linked with labelling of dissenting voices as anti-nationals, most prominent examples happening to be such labelling of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students, people participating in anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) movement in Shaheen Bagh in 2019–2020, Delhi, or farmers protesting against the farm laws in 2020–2021.

Scholarly studies as well as political discourses related to the issue of secularism in the Indian context have focused on the concept in the light of a particular mode of Hinduism – i.e. the Brahminical tradition. It is done in such a way that the term secularism has lost its relevance in the contemporary Indian value system to become a popular slogan (Thapar, 2010). Similarly, Nandy (1998) mentions the inability of the concept of secularism to deliver what is needed in India's democracy. Sen (1998) finds similar scepticism even among the intellectuals. He finds a particular reluctance among the “secularist intellectuals in India” to take up the issue effectively. The ultimate dialectics as Chatterjee (1998, p. 348) identifies is some kind of an ideological battle where he argues everything depends on minorities' ability to “resist homogenization from outside and push for democratization from inside.” Guha (2016, p. 165), regarding religious harmony, argues “the citizen says (rightly) that it [the harmony] should really be much better. The historian adds the caveat that it could, in fact, have been much worse.” For Bhargava (2010), Indians tend to forget the purpose of secularism in time and again. Instead, the word is ritualistically used in our everyday life. For Thapar (2010), Indian secularism has actually promoted Brahminism and excluded not only other religious forms but also the varieties of Hindu practices. Perhaps the seriousness of the communal crisis at a quite personal and administrative level is noted in Jawaharlal Nehru's series of letters to chief ministers where he refers to secularism in India as a mechanism that should go beyond religious freeplay and also include social and political equality (Nehru, 1985–1989; Guha, 2012, 2016). How, over the years this form of secular politics has changed and differently perceived by a variety of stakeholders needs a separate study; however, it is needless to mention that Babri Masjid demolition is one of the landmarks to strengthening the religious foundation of post-independent Indian civilisation. At present, there is ample evidence to prove a growing intolerance, cultivation of identity politics and shrinking of secular democratic space in the country. Although there are histories of books burning, vandalisation of paintings during the earlier Congress regimes and even in apparently secular democratic Left-ruled states, “now, perhaps for the first time in our history as an independent nation, serious, well respected writers are murdered, physically eliminated for their views” (Guha, 2016, p. 39).

Apart from a few like Eckert (2009), who points towards the broad organisational aspects and stereotyping of religious polarisation, there is a shortage of ethnographic studies explaining the cultivation of polarisation. It is important to address the gap between studies on ideological issues of secularism and on effects of religious polarisation and violence; both of them give no empirical details on the cultivation of polarisation. More specifically, it is relatively lesser known in what ways religion and politics interface at the local and micro-level, which results in religious intolerance. This book is an attempt to unearth such mechanisms of religious polarisation

and its interface with politics in West Bengal. While India is observing a rapid rise of religious intolerance for quite some time now, West Bengal is seeing such issues relatively recently. Consequently, the state occupies an important position to study the mechanisms by which fundamentalist forces rise and push secular and democratic forces away.

Religious intolerance in India is an undercurrent that the political forces have used, ignored and suppressed in a variety of ways. The constitutional provision of India being a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic has been highly contested. Four distinct lines of the debate can be identified (Bhargava, 1998). The liberal left sees Hindutva as a failure of secular outlook of the state and delay of modernisation. The public display and stronger attachment to religion and primordial identity sentiment are symptoms of the lack of the emergence of civic idea (Iyer, 1976; Chatterji, 1995; Sen, 1998). Scholars like Madan (1987), Nandy (1998) find no essential connection between secularism and India. Madan (1987) uses strong words and contends that since Hindu and Islam don't really have a history of reformation, secularism will remain at best in paper and executed in a top-down way (see also Nandy, 1988). This second approach recommends seeking an answer to religious intolerance in the Indian tradition of tolerance not in imposing secularism in a top-down way. Hindu nationalists' argument of special recognition of minorities especially the Muslims as "pseudo-secularism" represents the third approach towards the concept of secularism. They argue that Indian National Congress is the one who brings religion into politics by differentiating Hindus and Muslims which a genuine secularist state would never do (Talrejā, 1996). Political philosopher Bhargava (1995) argues for a fourth alternative in which we have to remove the institutionalised division between "secular" and "religious" and bring together values shared by different religions into public life in India. He strongly argues for the possibilities of such formulation that could be embraced by all. Scholars like Chatterjee (1994), Chandhoke (1999) and Nigam (2006) have shown that the four different approaches towards secularism have inherent profound intolerance and often headed in blind alleys. Each of the scholars they argue has bypassed the urge to stabilise and normalise meanings for religion and secularism. The result of this rather fuzzy conceptualisation of secularism and religious practices, the blurred boundary between state and religion and public and private religiosity is a sublimation of intolerance and spur of religious violence every once in a while. Politically, India has seen a lack of trust in the constitutional secularism over the years as the number of communal conflicts has been steady over the years (Nath and Roy Chowdhury, 2019a). West Bengal's relatively recent rise of the communalisation is both unique and closely linked to the steady growth of religious intolerance in India. As I will show, this is to a great extent connected with the use of cultural and traditional expressive mechanisms in legitimising the governance forming a majoritarianism. I have theorised this phenomenon as "cultural

misrecognition.” This is a strategy of consensus building based upon explicit use of cultural traditions in the form of a misrecognition since it diverts attention from the real interest related to the equitable distribution of public services (Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming; Guha, 2021).

2 Memories from a distant past bite back

The three and half decades of continuous, stable LF rule in Bengal is often seen as an outcome of Bengal’s chaotic history before the Left assumed power. The Congress party failed to reduce the high rates of poverty, famine and communal riots immediately after independence, resulting from the partition of the country to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and West Bengal. In August 1946, for example, there was a Hindu–Muslim riot, infamously known as “the great Calcutta killing,” that took place in then Calcutta. Muslims were mobilised by All-India Muslim League and Hindus by the Indian National Congress (henceforth the Congress). The official estimate, which is quite conservative, shows that about 4,000 people were killed, 10,000 were injured and about 30,000 people were evacuated to safety (Mansergh and Moon, 1977). Shortly after independence, the rapid increase in refugees carrying horrific memories of Muslim atrocities in East Pakistan has resulted in communal unrest in Calcutta. Indian Hindus, especially those having relatives and friends in East Pakistan, saw Muslims as a threat. Sengupta (2015), studying West Bengal Legislative Assembly proceedings and people’s social and personal memories, argues that there were desperate appeals on behalf of the Muslim minorities of the city in February 1950 as they were living under tremendous apprehension. Despite several appeals, a full-fledged riot broke out on 8 February 1950. She mentions “till 1958, the government had received at least 3176 applications from Muslims reclaiming their properties that were forcibly occupied during the February riot. At the same time, the government claimed that they already had restored to Muslims 956 houses originally owned by Muslims but which were later forcibly occupied by refugees from East Pakistan in 1950. These numbers together provide an idea about the intensity of the riot” (Sengupta, 2015, p. 444). Riots like these are to be seen in the context of Noakhali riots (in East Pakistan) and Bihar riots. The two along with “great Calcutta killing” in 1946 have made minorities from both sides of the borders sceptical, traumatised and terrorised. Therefore, the riot-linked public memory is more prominently associated with the Majoritarian Hindus and their sufferings with the Noakhali riot and the great Calcutta killing. Blaming “Suhrawardy as its main culprit [of great Calcutta killing] is much more etched in the public memory of the city” (Sengupta, 2015, p. 445), and people, including scholars, talk much less about the February 1950 riot which, as studied by Sengupta (2015), has radically changed the ethnic landscape of the city.

While riots like the two have just been mentioned belong to some of the most dreaded events in the history of West Bengal, there were many small-scale events that kept the Hindu–Muslim interface a problematic one. Over the years, the nature of West Bengal violence became an ideological one as exemplified by the 1967 peasant uprising and radical leftist movement in Naxalbari and also in the city of Kolkata. It was violently repressed by a Congress-led government which included the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), the largest party of the LF coalition which ruled the state for three decades, in its coalition (Singh, 1995; Roy, 2010; Pal, 2017). There were spells of presidential rule in 1968, 1970 and 1971 because of the repeated failure of the state governments. In 1977, the CPIM-led LF came to power primarily because of people’s disgust with earlier governments. With LF’s assumption of power, they initiated radical change through land reform and decentralised governance with regularised election, better construction and maintenance of public goods particularly during the early years of its rule (Lieten, 1996a, 1996b; Biju, 1998; Rawal and Swaminathan, 1998; Mathew, 2001; Sengupta and Gazder, 1997; Mookherjee, 1998). Even during the nationwide spell of riots like the 1984 anti-Sikh riots or 1992 Babri Masjid demolition-led riots, West Bengal has been rather peaceful. It is only recently that riots have once again been back in the state.

Scholars, especially the historians, see riots as part of identity politics (e.g. Pandey, 2001). Other social sciences have tried to address the complex, multilayered and multifaceted nature of riots. Compared to present-day India, West Bengal, after LF’s three-decade-long rule, has a much recent rise of identity consolidation. It manifests dimensions of intentional cleavage construction which should be seen as historical phenomena (Laitin and Posner, 2001; Thapar, 2014), having electoral intentions (Brass, 2005; Pai, 2013; Wilkinson, 2004). The sudden rise in such intentional “construction” of social categories along with ethnic boundaries is resulting in consolidation of identity categories and promotion of mutual apprehensions between different identities (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). These constructs have such structural mechanisms as civil society, organisations and government bodies (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Brass, 1991; Anand, 2005), which makes institutional riot possible (Brass, 2005). Constructivists explore the mechanisms of stereotyping for identity construction vis-à-vis marginalisation (Banerjee, 2008) and riot-affected existence (Robinson, 2005; Gupta, 2011; Gayar and Jaffrelot, 2012). Social scientists have used multiple methods ranging from narrative analysis to interviews. Das (1990) has unearthed the gendered nature of riots mostly through ethnography. Tambiah (1996) studied riots from the position of crowd theory. Roy (1994) has used narrative analysis to bring out painful narratives linked to Bangladesh’s forgotten riots. McAdam et al. (2001) have used the theory of contentious politics to make sense of South Asian riots. Nassbaum (2007) brings out the dimensions of historical channelisation of social psychology especially of the Hindu far right. She

argues that the growth of Hindu nationalism is comparable to the rise of fascism in Germany. While for Germany it has a linkage with the German's defeat in World War I, for Hindu nationalists, it is the humiliation they face under the British and their infamous and often criticised role in India's freedom struggle. Regarding the nature of everydayness of the riots and the ways to prevent them, there are disagreements within the scholars. Brass (1996, 2003, 2006) has maintained that there exists an "institutionalised riot systems" that is used in triggering and sustaining violence. Therefore, in order to stop riots, one has to dismantle the institutionalised riot systems. Vershney (2002) finds only pre-existing local civic networks between Hindus and Muslims with everyday exchange and association can prevent riots. Wilkinson (2004) maps the electoral incentives of ethnic violence. He shows that ethnic riots are not spontaneous eruptions but are mostly planned by politicians for electoral purposes. Deployment of police and other forces on time, or broadly speaking, the state's action has a decisive role to play in prevention of riots. Most of the riot-linked studies are a) after-effect studies and b) historical and metanarratives of ethnic conflicts. Ethnographic studies on the mechanisms of riots, its design, organisational bases and mechanisms of spread have been limited (Chatterjee, 2017). Among the few, scholars like Benei (2008) give ethnographic details of such mechanisms through the use of symbols such as the "mother country," national flag and sports of mock warfare as prominent manifestations promotion of Hindu nationalism in Kolhapur of Maharashtra. Berti et al.'s (2011) compilation largely deals with instances of propagation of Hindutva through a) cultural and artistic expressions, b) appeals of charismatic personalities having Hinduised affiliation and c) a few forms of resistance to such propagation. Scholars like Eckert (2009) and Roy (2017) bear ethnographic essence in their studies on polarisation. The dimensions of manufactured polarisation in a state like West Bengal, showing immunity to such constructs for decades, perhaps have never been studied.² Furthermore, there is a gap between studies on theoretical issues of secularism and effects of religious polarisation and violence. While there are explanatory capacities of broader frameworks such as symbolic-cultural and institutional mechanisms of polarisation, its everyday practices are hitherto unknown. This book is an attempt to address the lack of ethnographically informed studies on religious polarisation and its interface with politics in West Bengal. Since West Bengal is seeing the rise of identity polarisation relatively recently, it occupies an important position to give ethnographic details of the mechanisms by which fundamentalist forces rise and push secular and democratic forces away.

3 Addressing a wider gap

This book occupies a unique position because of the methodology I adopted, the issues I have addressed and finally because of the very moment in which

this work is conducted. The book presents narratives, issues and events as they unfold at places where riots have taken place. Instead of exploring only the after-effects of riots which are extremely important, this book studies identity consolidation as it happens through multi-sited ethnography over a period of time. My ethnographies are not in the classical anthropological ones that attempted a holistic description of a culture, but these are the descriptions of my interaction with people who are directly affected and at the same time perpetuated identity consolidation and riots. It also describes and analyses the contexts, issues and events as they unfold during my fieldwork. One can call this a participatory ethnography to a certain extent because many of the places where I did my fieldwork are nearby and I often spent hours just being there. Following recent anthropological orientation, this may be called a multisite ethnography of riots and identity polarisation (Marcus, 1995; Gellner, 2012; Auyero, 2004; Burawoy, 2013). I have conducted dozens of full-length interviews along with numerous casual conversations and several group discussions. I have explored the events as they have unfolded often just by being at places where people meet and talk like tea stalls, *ghats* of the river Hooghly and railway stations. The findings of this intensive ethnographic research along with my theoretical understanding of this issue are presented in five chapters followed by conclusions. I have laid out the theoretical formulation in Chapter 2 of the book. Here I have pointed out how the “cultural capital of India” the nickname earned by the city of Kolkata started to go beyond the so-called “cultural” and expressional boundaries and have become a political weapon to secure mass support. I show that it was first done by the TMC through policy decisions and promotions of fairs and festivals and then by the BJP by utilising Hindutva sentiments. I have theorised this phenomenon by using Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition and have mapped the consolidation of misrecognition-based politics over the years. The misrecognition-based politics have resulted in a new form of identity-based political violence replacing earlier party-based political violence. I have discussed this changing nature of Bengal violence over the years in Chapter 3. Using ethnographic reflections on the recent riots and changing political spectrum of the state, this chapter shows how communal violence is replacing partisan violence and why it has a lasting impact on the social fabric of the state. Chapter 4 discusses the rise of Islamic fundamentalism through a rather unknown way. Using ethnographic case studies from two Muslim-predominated districts of the state, this chapter shows how Shariya followers through their Mosque-based organisations, backed by local political forces, are replacing the relatively open and syncretic pir and sufi traditions in West Bengal. I have shown how cross-border operation of the fundamentalist organisations has played a significant role in creating and nurturing the Islamic fundamentalism, in what ways the administration and political players have misread the Islamic traditions as a monolithic tradition and

how far it leaves an impact on the public sphere at large through the spread of misinformation popularised by the pro-Hindutva machineries including their Information Technology (IT) wings. Islamic fundamentalism in West Bengal is coeval with the rise of Hindutva organisations. Chapter 5 is my ethnographic reflections on the organisations, their activities and the effects of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. I have focused on the rise and maturation of certain key “cultural” expressions like Ram Navami, Hanuman temple and Ganga Aarati and have mapped the organisational backdrop of such development. In Chapter 6, I focus exclusively on my ethnographic study of some of the recent riots in West Bengal. Here I have focused on how fundamentalist forces as discussed in previous chapters have confronted and resulted in full-fledged but low-intense riots which furthered the identity consolidation. I present ethnographic descriptions on the nature and impact of riots in jute-mill belt at places like Naihati-Hajinagar, Kankinara-Bhatpara, coal belt at Asansol-Raniganj and social media-led riot in Baduria-Basirhat. I show how local political economy, goons and identity sentiments proliferated by the political use of cultural expressions fuel violence to bring out primordial identity issues back in mainstream politics. It has become a decisive factor among the electorates in making political choices to push away democratic-secular forces from the major political discourses of the state. While this book is an outcome of a series of multi-site ethnographies conducted exclusively in West Bengal, the themes and conceptualisation it derives from them have a much wider relevance. The Bengal’s mode of social cleavage and its political interface does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, what is happening in West Bengal is part of the wider structural design of the politics of communalism. Chapter 7 addresses this issue and establishes the concept of cultural misrecognition as a possible model to explain the contemporary mode of identity politics in India. It focuses on the communal issues linked with cattle-linked lynching, Delhi riots and shows how far and in what ways competitive communalism is growing. This chapter sums up the core themes of cultural misrecognition and shows how this mode of politics was defeated by service delivery-oriented politics in West Bengal and also in Delhi. This chapter is followed by a conclusion where I focus on eight uniquely developed major domains of identity politics in West Bengal, compare the Islamic and Hindu fundamentalisms in their symbolic, practice and political domains and argue that identity proliferation instead of party mediation is bringing irreversible changes in the public sphere of the state.

Notes

- 1 According to an estimate by International Labour Organisation fetched by statistica.com from 17.75% of unemployment in 1999, today we have about 23.75% of youth unemployment. This means roughly about 5,30,00,000 people

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are jobless in 2020 and are actively seeking a job in India. You can see more details here: www.statista.com/statistics/812106/youth-unemployment-rate-in-india/#:~:text=Youth%20unemployment%20rate%20in%20India%20in%202020&text=In%202020%2C%20the%20estimated%20youth,around%20the%2022%20percent%20mark.

- 2 Except for a couple of my own co-authored articles. See Nath and Roy Chowdhury, 2019a, 2019b.

CULTURE, POWER AND MISRECOGNITIONS IN WEST BENGAL

There is this puzzle that haunts many of the present inhabitants of the state with an experience of LF-led government. The puzzle is to make sense of the transformation of state politics from relatively secular “party society” to organisations linked with primordial identity within a relatively small spell of time. It requires a closer understanding of the interface between “culture” and “power.” I find misrecognition or more specifically “cultural misrecognition” as an important tool to explore this interface. Before commenting on the theoretical dimension of the concept, let me begin with an anecdote of how the power of culture has been systematically used by the Left in their rule and how did it transform over the years. The LF over the years has made the capital city Kolkata, erstwhile Calcutta to earn the nickname as the “cultural capital of India.” The International Kolkata film festival, the largest conglomeration of books in the International Kolkata Book Fair, and liberal cultural hubs like Nandan and Rabindra Sadan complex have always had the Government of West Bengal’s (GoWB’s) active sponsorship. The last LF Chief Minister Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was often seen spending time at the Nandan Complex. Decked with milky white traditional Dhoti and Punjabi, the left leaders often embodied the hallmark of what is theorised as *Distinction* by Bourdieu (1984). During the heyday of the left rule of West Bengal, the left leaning cultural and intellectual civil society members could form the so-called “*Bhadralok*” politics. It marked a conscious class boundary. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, such use of “culture” through artistic expressions has a triple effect, viz., class definition, class segregation and class membership. Bhadraklok politics has occupied much of the political spectrum of West Bengal both during the colonial and post-colonial period until the end of LF rule in 2011. To a certain extent, the ultimate “stamp of respectability” (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 70) came from English education (Bose, 1958). LF as several scholarly studies reveal at best became entangled with the middle classes and couldn’t really reach the grassroots masses over the three decades of its rule. Even after the well-executed land reform, strong affiliation with All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), LF could never reach beyond the middle peasantry (Kohli, 1983, 1987; Bhattacharyya, 2001,

2004, 2009, 2010, 2016; Rudra, 1981, 1985). The LF-led party society that could supersede all other alternative forms of public transactions including primordial identity-based organisations was primarily based on the upper and middle peasantry at the villages and educated Bhadrak elites at the cities (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Chatterjee, 2004; Nath and Chakrabarti, 2011; Nath, 2020a, 2021a). Prominent cultural fronts forming the ideological apparatuses of LF rule were curved out by celebrated writers and poets like Manik Bandyopadhyay and Samar Sen, theatre personalities including Bijon Bhattacharya and Sambhu Mitra and film makers like Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Bimal Roy. All of them and many others joined the movement of class mobilisation through their artistic performances which “resulted in considerable increase in the involvement of the Bhadraks in revolutionary politics” (Chatterjee and Basu, 2020, p. 77).

It is difficult to ethnographically investigate and bring out a proof that such highbrow cultural apparatus and LF’s leaning had its own contradictions within the masses. It is understandable that such elite cultural expressions had inherent exclusionary mechanisms. I remember Sukdeb, a tribal youth, back in January 2009 saying, “We would like our heritage to get recognition. It should not follow your way of festive celebration; it should be done in our own way!” (Nath, 2020a, p. 146). Sukdeb could see what I failed to understand at that time. I later explored this issue in detail and unravelled that the excluded cultural apparatuses were tapped effectively by TMC since 2011 (Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming). Mamata Banerjee, the TMC supremo, began her land-related agitations in Singur and Nandigram by involving prominent Kolkata-based intellectuals and civil society activists like film maker Aparna Sen, poet Joy Goswami, theatre personalities like Bratya Basu, Kaushik Sen and Shaoli Mitra (daughter of left leaning Sambhu Mitra) and painters like Subhaprasanna, but simultaneously she could reach beyond such elite intellectual clout because of such tapping at the grassroots. Large flexes demanding *poribartan* meaning the political change used to include Mamata Banerjee along with these personalities. During TMC’s rule, highbrow culture began to dismantle and more liquid form of culture–power interface started to emerge (Bauman, 2011). Peterson and Simkus (1992) and Peterson (2005) call it “omnivorousness” – a situation in which people start to consume both highbrow and mass popular culture. West Bengal has seen a precise moment of such cross-cutting use of cultural apparatuses embodied chiefly by Mamata Banerjee-led TMC somewhere around 2009. It was the time when TMC started to fare well in different elections (Nath, 2018, 2020a; Figure 2.1). Mamata Banerjee herself struggled but continued to portray herself as a person with artistic sensibilities. She was seen as making painting from the protest venue during the Singur agitation. She has managed to publish several books even though some of them have created serious humour among the readers because of their sheer ‘nonsense.’ She continues to write and paint and doesn’t seem to

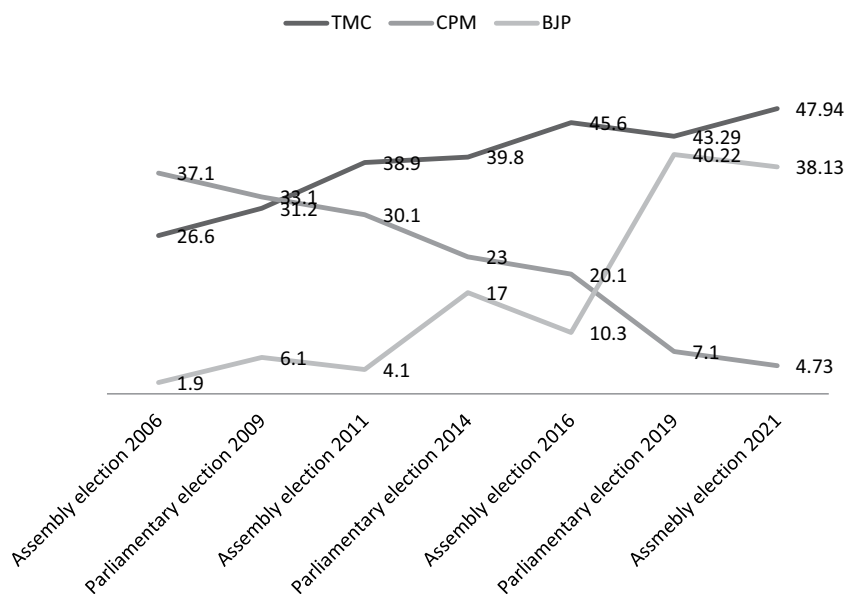


Figure 2.1 Vote share percentage of TMC, CPIM and BJP over the years

Source: Election Commission of India and indiavotes.com

care much about the criticisms. This very feature along with her active participation in different cultural programmes and GoWB's active promotion of festivals like Yatra Utsav and Maati Utsav indicate a conscious attempt to connect with the masses through cultural expressions.

The 34 years of LF-led political stability according to Chatterjee (2009) is linked to the institutional effectiveness of the LF Government, especially the CPIM. He finds a system of clientelism politics that starts facing disruption only after 2006. Commonly cited reasons behind the 2011 political change include TMC-led land-related movements at Singur (Hooghly district) and Nandigram (Purba Medinipur district). Renewed agitations related to the formation of Gorkha Land in North Bengal and tribal agitations in Paschim Medinipur (as predicted by Chatterjee, 2009). However, in a sample survey, Bardhan et al. (2014) argue that such movements have only partial impact on the political change of the state. Rather, there are several micro issues related to the organisational failure of left parties. They point towards factionalism, poor-quality leadership and corruption as some of the major reasons responsible for the change. In my 2020 book explaining political change and its aftermath, I have explored the political dynamism at the village level beyond the grand narratives of Singur and Nandigram (Nath,

2020a). I have studied the microdynamics of everyday politics revolving around the Gram Panchayats (lowest of the three-tier Panchayat system) spearheading the political change and an increasing stability of the TMC government in the first seven years of their rule. The 2018 Panchayat election which saw the largest number of uncontested seats over the years and the 2019 Parliamentary election in which BJP showed considerable potential are the signs of a possible change of the political spectrum of the state (Nath, 2020b). TMC made a conscious and concentrated attempt to free local politics and local governance mechanisms from the strong party grip or the “party society” (Nath, 2017). Instead, they have reinvented various traditional cultural forms and used them as a political tool alternative to the party organisation (Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming).

Cultural power

In my 2018 *EPW* article, I have described with intricate details that little-known lowbrow cultural expressions were systematically used to legitimise skewed delivery of public services. I further showed that such use of cultural expressions has helped in bypassing people’s demands related to the delivery of public services. The study was local in nature, conducted at a Gram Panchayat region in a remote place in the district of Bankura (Nath, 2018), but I could find such a mechanism working at many other places in a variety of forms. I theorised it as “cultural misrecognition” – a mechanism which I found to be quite effective in practice throughout the state.

Conceptualisation of local politics in West Bengal has been done by using notions of clientelism, hegemonic relationships and domination. Conceptual categories such as elite capture, Political Society and Party Society are used in addressing these issues (Harriss-White, 2003, 2008; Chatterjee, 2004; Bhattacharyya, 2009, 2016). Each of these issues invites an engagement with the nature of political consciousness of the weaker sections often referred to as subalterns and proletariats. To do so, adopting the Foucauldian concept of power is quite apt as he attempts to go beyond the dichotomy of power have and power have not. For Foucault (1980, p. 98), “Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. . . . Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.” Therefore, power should be treated as a generic concept with a central focus on studying the relevant mechanisms by which power is put into action. Contrary to the notion of power as something which is possessed by a handful of people and which is concerned only with oppression, he further argues that even in its most constraining and oppressive measures, power is productive which gives rise to new forms of behaviour (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, the weaker section also has the capacity to resist the domination which is exercised on them. According to Guha (1988), the

subaltern exists in an “autonomous domain” that is at complete disjuncture from elite politics. It is often seen as a static category that participates in a rebellion only in exceptional cases. Otherwise, they negotiate and manage encounters with the state through everyday politics (Sarkar, 2000). It is also seen that subaltern consciousness is formed within specific configuration of power which is historical; therefore, it changes with time (Chatterjee, 2010). The subaltern consciousness, therefore, requires some form of a discursive sphere. Habermas’s (1989) theorisation of “public sphere” is a democratic and non-coercive sphere in social life. Being a discursive space, issues of mutual interest and difference can be solved by deliberation and rational dialogue. Civil society according to Habermas is grounded in this sphere, where the “public” is an autonomous authority separate from the state and the private sphere of civil society. Although the public sphere is accorded with high democratic principles of citizenship and equality, Habermas, nevertheless, questions the nature of “public” involved in the public sphere, which is already structured by power relations and hierarchy. This question is aptly addressed by Gramsci (1971) where he finds civil society as a buffer of the state where the hegemony of the bourgeoisie prevails. It helps to understand the impediments, which prevent a Habermasian open dialogue in the public sphere (Gramsci, 1971). The sphere of civil society is already biased towards those who have the social and cultural capital to hegemonise this sphere. Language and culture of the subalterns experience a defeat because of their unequal status of “lower” social and cultural capital. Moreover, the Symbolic Capital of the higher classes in civil society tends to keep subaltern voices unheard. This is done by forming a particularistic interest of the public sphere which results in lack of common interest, in consequence when the subaltern speaks they are either simply ignored or silenced and therefore they are never “audible” (Chandhoke, 2003, pp. 172–173). Sometimes, this results in resistance and social movement through the formation of counterpublics. The concept itself is developed primarily through a historical analysis of the limitations of the bourgeois public sphere and the existence of the proletariat public sphere carrying a subaltern angle, which is something that pre-exists and is in a constant process of production (Negt and Kluge, 1993). Fraser (1990, 1997) finds in actually existing democracy that there are many public spheres emerged in relation to the state as well as bourgeois public sphere. In a democratic system, the radical democratic scholars argue that the nature of counterpublics is associated with a constant struggle between opposing hegemonic political projects. Negt and Kluge (1993) find that there are sudden unplanned activities primarily because the people from below do not want to be regulated. There is a creative fusion of various ideological layers and expressions of their anger. Such movements have the potential for leading towards a dangerous outcome as well as democratic possibilities.

Therefore, theoretically in any political terrain, there is a dialectics of consciousness put into action. The most primary form of dialectics in the context of political control is between those relatively powerful people (political leaders, economic elites and the like) who try to rationalise their position through a variety of means and those of the weaker sections who try to subvert the domination exercised on them. In this context, conceptualising the interplay of power requires relatively more refined conceptual parameters than hegemony and domination. In such a dialectics, for Gramsci, the role of “organic intellectual” becomes important. Organic intellectuals – organically connected to a class – have two functions: a) to contest the ideologies of the dominant classes by revealing their arbitrary nature and b) to elaborate the good sense, a form of consciousness of the oppressed class. They are supposed to turn the consciousness into theoretical knowledge. It can only be achieved when organic intellectuals are embedded in an organisation. In Fraser’s (1990, p. 67) term, it has to be the counterpublics, which is “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses.” Such a conception for Bourdieu (1984) has some fundamental flaws. He finds that all classes suffer from a fundamental misrecognition of their place in the world. They follow a logic of their own, a logic of practice, but they do not have the capacity and conditions to make that logic the object of analysis, to move from the logic of practice to the logic of theory. He argues:

It is not a question of the truth or falsity of the unsupportable image of the working class world that the intellectual produces when, putting himself in the place of a worker without having the habitus of a worker, he apprehends the working-class condition through schemes of perception and appreciation which are not those that the members of the working class themselves use to apprehend it. It is truly the experience that an intellectual can obtain of the working-class world by putting himself provisionally and deliberately into the working-class condition, and it may become less and less improbable if, as is beginning to happen, an increasing number of individuals are thrown into the working-class condition without having the habitus that is the product of the conditionings “normally” imposed on those who are condemned to this condition. Populism is never anything other than an inverted ethnocentrism.

(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 374)

Gramsci is confident about the good sense that lies within the working-class consciousness of organic intellectuals, while Bourdieu denies there can be any such good sense, and so for him, dialogue has to be artificial and thus dangerous. Therefore, addressing domination has two dimensions. On the

one side, we have Gramsci's hegemony which is based on consent, and on the other side, we have Bourdieu's symbolic violence which is based on misrecognition. With the consenting nature of the concept, hegemony is not based on unconscious foundation. Rather, it is protected by coercion no matter what subtle means it adopts. Therefore, to explain existing inequality and domination, there are parallels between hegemony and symbolic power. Nevertheless, their differences are fundamental. For Bourdieu, domination is primarily based on a symbolic universe that defines the categories of *distinction* and thereby mystifies the underlying reality. Who then will fight the classification struggle, or the dialectics in the present context? In Bourdieu's world, the invisibility of domination is founded on the concordance of a social structure with a habitus inculcated by the same social structure. At the same time, the durability of habitus, the permanence of its dispositions, inevitably brings about discordance between habitus and specific fields, what Bourdieu calls hysteresis. In sum, the significant point of difference between hegemony and symbolic violence is that "hegemony is explicit and overt and, thus, can be subverted by the organic intellectual [as they are embedded in their class positions] while the symbolic violence is deep and unconscious, appreciated by the sociologist" (Burawoy, 2008).

In order to comprehend the reasons for which the weaker sections (subalterns) often consent their own domination, the notion of false consciousness is critical (Lukes, 2005). Both Bourdieu and Gramsci address this notion in their own ways. Here the question of legitimacy and consent and power comes in. To address the issues of legitimacy and consent, there are two different perspectives towards false consciousness in Gramsci and Bourdieu. For Gramsci, the questionable part of false consciousness is its "falseness." For Bourdieu, the problem is not with the "falseness" but with "consciousness" which cannot address the depth of symbolic domination (Burawoy, 2012). Bourdieu finds that symbolic domination settles within the unconscious because people accumulate sedimentations of social structure. Therefore, consent is too weak to explain the nature of domination which is the idea of "misrecognition" embedded within the habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). For Bourdieu instead of direct violence, symbolic violence is what contemporary society experiences. To explore the ways in which such misrecognition and symbolic violence are generated, it is important to look at habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Here habitus is seen as an outcome of a conflict between relatively powerful and relatively powerless for prestige and status to form a tacit knowledge. Bourgeois reifies their particular manners as "natural" and thus manages to define what constitutes the "correct" socialisation. Once a particular habitus is "naturalised," as superior to the habitus of others, it constitutes "cultural capital" which is another resource for the constitution of power hierarchy. Such existing inequalities indirectly shape people's experiences and expectations through "habitus effect." As Bourdieu often puts it, habitus pushes people to "refuse what they are refused" and opt for

“the choice of necessity” (Bourdieu, 1996, 2008). If we consider Gramsci’s (1971) idea of capitalist system as having endless fortifications and ditches, cultural capital constitutes some of such ditches.

The entire game of contesting political consciousness has a lot of stake in the domain of culture. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) addresses this issue in terms of people’s “practice” and “strategy.” What people actually do become part of their culture and are outcomes of neither freely chosen (like independent agency theorists posit) nor are fixed like rituals (like structuralists argue) or based completely on rational calculations (rational choice theorists see). There is a complex and mediated connection between the social world existing out there as a structure and elements entering inside the agents. Giddens (1993) finds three major aspects of such connections, a) structures of domination, b) structures of signification [meaning] and c) structures of legitimation [norm]. For Bourdieu, they are shaped by a practical sense acquired by people through their socialisation in a particular habitus. Habitus, therefore, is an “uncontrolled” mechanism through which society manages to shape individual strategies. It is uncontrolled because habitus is formed through an unpredictable and dynamic combination of social, cultural and symbolic capital. While social capital as social networks, cultural capital as knowledge, skills and practices are shaped by various forces, symbolic capital is the politics that tend to control over the meaning people convey to their world. It is always hidden in cultural knowledge, only manifested in people’s practices, available to be read and interpreted. For Bourdieu (1984), symbolic domination in public life holds an important key to explain what stops the oppressed to overthrow the existing structure. A form of “misrecognition” is embedded within the habitus and as my earlier ethnographic works reveal in West Bengal, TMC is using “cultural misrecognition” to legitimise their decisions (Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming).

The use of misrecognitions in politics and policy

Although many of academic discourses on politics, including the issues of power in identity, social movements and factionalism, revolve around the politics of recognition through inclusion and maintenance of distinctiveness, there is an increasing recognition of the existence of a deeper layer of misrecognition (Markell, 2003, see also Ricoeur, 2005). Markell (2003) holds that recognition theory suppresses the innate fragility of human existence, the fact that it is inevitably conditioned by finitude and tragedy. It echoes in other scholars like Oliver (2001) when she explains how the struggle for recognition actually reproduces and sustains a psychological dynamism of contestation and domination. For McNay (2008), abstract social structures mediate and condition human experience through habitus.

Bourdieu’s (1984) *Distinction* in terms of culture’s role in defining and maintaining class boundaries started to dissolve as more and more popular

art forms started to penetrate through Omnivors (Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 2005). This loss of culture's position in maintaining the status quo and class boundary, according to Bauman (2005, 2011), is an indication of the fact that modernity was transformed from its solid state to liquid state or to a state of post-modernity. However, the cultural power to influence the decision-making of a large population has remained rather unchanged. The phenomenon of political change in West Bengal in 2011 occupies a specific moment in the ways in which cultural expressions are perceived by the large section of rural people. As the LF with its Kolkata intellectual highbrow cultural affiliation was wittingly or unwittingly alienating the "subalterns," TMC on the other hand has been at the forefront in organising Kolkata-based Durgotsav celebrations since its inception. As a political alternative in West Bengal, they found it relatively easy to tap the popular and everyday cultural practices throughout the state (Nath, forthcoming). By 1990s, LF was already getting entangled with new middle-class Bhadraklok. In villages, one of the prominent classes was the school teachers and other white-collared professionals having considerable amount of landholding (Bhattacharyya, 2001; Nath and Chakrabarti, 2011; Nath, 2021b). Rogaly (1998) notes that it was the middle peasant – the *chashi* who have used the LF, especially CPIM to appropriate their interests. Nath and Chakrabarti (2011) and Nath (2021b) show that the network of middle peasants has largely remained unchanged even after the political change, which indicates economic reasons superseding political ideology. This was the moment when instead of resisting the aggressive expansion of global capital, with a clear mandate in the 2006 assembly election, LF became committed to "create a favourable political condition for market liberalisation to allow free play of corporate capital . . . violently suppress people's resistance against the onslaught of multinational capital" (Chatterjee and Basu, 2020, p. 78, see also Bhattacharyya, 2010). As LF was clearly detached from the lower peasantry, a large chunk of landless labourers, shared croppers and other poor and marginal people found TMC as their saviour. Their popular slogan *Maa-mati-manush* – mother-earth-people reflected this sentiment in contrast to LF's *Krishi aamader bhatti, shilpo aamader bhobissot* – farming is our foundation and industrialisation is our future. This slogan crystallised the fact that LF was ready to actively participate in the race between states to invite multinational capital instead of their earlier class-based mobilisation of land reform *Langal jar jomi taar* – land belongs to the cultivator. Expectedly, this move widened the gap between large populace of the marginal section which got furthered with agitation and reaction of state machineries not only in Singur and Nandigram but also in a vast section of the western part of West Bengal, popularly known as the *Jungle mahal* – the forested regions. TMC's response to the LF especially during its last few years was commendable. While TMC supremo along with the intellectual civil society partners launched anti-land acquisition movements, the party at

large could effectively capitalise on the cultural alienation by the LF. Broadly speaking, the strategy was to bring the matrix of highbrow, Kolkata-based intellectual cultural sphere at the distant corners of the state. Hence, it was a spectacle to see Aparna Sen, Kaushik Sen, Joy Goswami and Shaonli Mitra meeting the Maoist-backed People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) leader Chhatradhar Mahato (Chattopadhyay, 2009)¹ and openly demanding for an end to the CPIM-led LF rule in West Bengal. Such popular appeals as this ran parallel to a process of symbolic construction of the "mother/elder sister" figure of Mamata Banerjee. She became a new protector of the interests of the land losers, marginal tribal and Maoist-state battle-affected villagers. This symbolic construction was so powerful that TMC could penetrate even further in Assembly Election 2016 at places that were traditionally considered as the LF bastions (*Ei Samay*, 2016). Samad-dar (2016a, 2016b) goes on to declare TMC's second term as subalternisation of politics, although from the nature of leadership, it is still sceptical if one can only say TMC has a weaker section's popular mandate rather than subalternisation (Bhattacharya, 2016). It was nevertheless clear that the heyday of Bhadrak politics was over (Ghosh, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2019).

TMC's unique strategy at least for the first five years of their rule was a service delivery-based politics.² They devised several policies that could supersede the party or other affiliations and give direct benefit to the beneficiaries. GoWB strengthened the administrative arm of the Local Governance system, used institutions like schools, and colleges to distribute popular schemes like Kanyashree and Sabuj Sathi (Ray and Dutta, 2017; Nath, 2018; Ray, 2020). As they focused more on the administrative mechanism for the delivery of public services, Ray and Dutta (2017) mention that there was an institutional vacuum created. Ray (2020) further elaborated on the issue to show that "party society" was superseded by TMC's politics. Corruption in such service delivery was one of the major issues on which the LF fought against TMC in the 2016 election. Nath (2017) found a particular form of disciplining of corruption which made the corrupt form of exchange acceptable to a certain extent. Chowdhury (2013) shows how the Sarada scam had connections with TMC leaders. EPW engage (2019) analyses such issues as corruption and Ponzi schemes characterising West Bengal politics during TMC's tenure, especially till 2016. All these are indicative of the fact that skewed allocation of public services exists and it is quite obvious that it requires a particular kind of legitimacy acquiring mechanism. Be it small scale or a large scale, TMC without a strong organisational background needs a particularly popular legitimising mechanism. It was a problem TMC addresses by using traditional cultural expressions. What I found at a remote GP in Bankura was diversification of schemes from Scheduled Tribe-dominated wards to Multi Caste-dominated wards bypassing the Annual Action Plan. It is also part of a corrupt mode of transaction. These decisions I found were made legitimate by using Santali village-level *sholo-aana*

meetings.³ I documented that instead of Gram Sabha – the annual meeting between GP members and electorate, TMC was using *Sholo-aana* to legitimise their decision. This is quite different from what the LF used to practice. During LF, everything was party mediated. *Sholo-aana* used to be held only to resolve issues like *sendra* – the hunting festival-related decisions, familial conflict and celebration of festivals. In order to understand the nature of involvement of local politics in such traditions, I have thoroughly studied conflict resolution process practiced by the LF and TMC. Figure 2.2 shows how TMC has involved its party mechanism within the traditional political system in an attempt to use cultural misrecognition to legitimise their decisions (Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming).

Such small-scale finding is part of a large design by TMC which were symbolic in most of the public events.

We can trace the roots of such use of cultural misrecognitions as early as 2008 in the Singur movement. Mamata Banerjee, according to Bhattacharya (2020a, p. 55), was busy in capturing Muslim support and washing off her affiliation with BJP a little more than two years ago. She used the phrase “two of our Muslim brothers were killed this morning. They were our supporters.” There was a clear report that the two deaths were a result of a road accident. She was not only converting an accidental death to a partisan one but also giving it for the first time perhaps a communal angle. In 2009, a couple of inauguration projects from Railway portrayed Mamata Banerjee in Hijab offering Namaaz. The advertisement “portrays the railways’ development projects as Eid gifts contain[ing] Islamic motifs such as a crescent moon, a star and the outlines of a mosque in the background” (Samyuktha, 2010). The use of Islamic symbols, Mamata Banerjee’s Hijab-clad public appearances in different Islamic gatherings, continued to spark controversies. Hijab, Fez and characteristic Islamic architectures began to occupy an important position in everyday public discourse. While Mamata Banerjee with Hijab started to have a symbolic construct of Mumtaz Begum (more about it later, see also Nath and Roychowdhury, 2019b), by 2013–2014, a construct of Fez versus Helmet added an important dimension to the Kolkata traffic rule enforcements. It was argued that Muslim youths in their ghettos like Park Circus, Rajabazar, Kidderpore and Ekbalpore were allowed to roam around without helmet. Wearing only a fez cap was enough for them to get a license to roam around freely while the same police imposed heavy penalty on Hindus who didn’t wear helmet (see also Bhattacharya, 2020a). However, in my personal experience of having friends at many places of the city, I know like many others, people of Kolkata usually do not follow such strict traffic rules in their known area. I have been a rider without helmet with a friend in the Tollygunj area. Being stopped by a traffic guard, my friend said, “we are locals, we just came to buy sweets, sorry sir!” It was enough reason for the traffic guard to let us go with a soft warning that before entering the main road we should wear it. I have never seen people

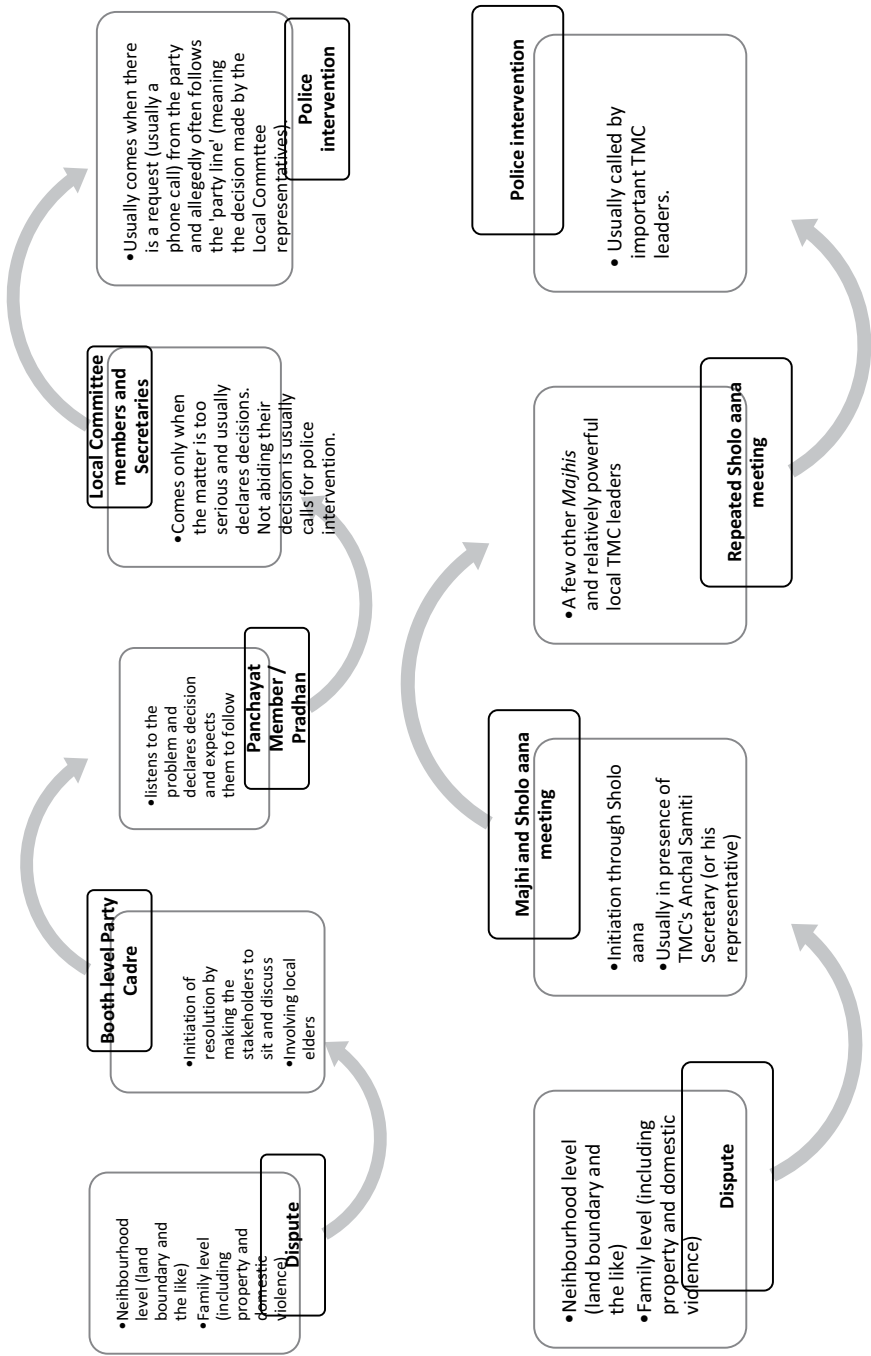


Figure 2.2 Mechanism for conflict resolution (top image belongs to CPM's mechanism and bottom image to that of TMC)
Source: Fieldwork data collected by the author.

wearing helmet when they go out and shop nearby, nor did I ever see people wearing helmet while participating in any political or religious bike-led processions like Hindu Pilgrimage to Kachua or Tarakeswar. However, the Kolkata police's bias was popularised mostly through social media and became part of the Hijab-Fez symbolic politics that dominated much of the public sphere of the state later on.

Concrete policy measures that bear the symptoms of the use of cultural misrecognition were the astronomical rise in budgetary allocation to the ministry of culture and information (Figure 2.3).

With the rising number of government-sponsored festivals and fairs, it can be understood that a substantive portion of the fund was spent to use cultural symbols channelised through programmes like Maati Utsav (Soil festival), Yatra Utsav (Folk theatre festival), Aahare Bangla (Food festival), Durgotsav Carnival, etc. For small-scale village fairs, it was government sponsorship being channelised through different stalls and information broadcast corners (Figure 2.4).

TMC didn't stop at using "cultural misrecognition" in the realm of the political trajectory only but also in framing state policies. A monthly honorarium for the Imams and Muezzins was declared in April 2012, which, as expected, was seen as a policy of Muslim appeasement. Similarly, "Aikashree," a scholarship funded by GoWB since 2019–2020 for students belonging to minority communities, added to the perception. With increasing polarisation and riots in the state, Muslims also didn't quite approve of such a divisive policy of the state (see Figure 2.5). In 2015, GoWB waived the Kolkata Municipality tax on advertisement during the Durgotsav and

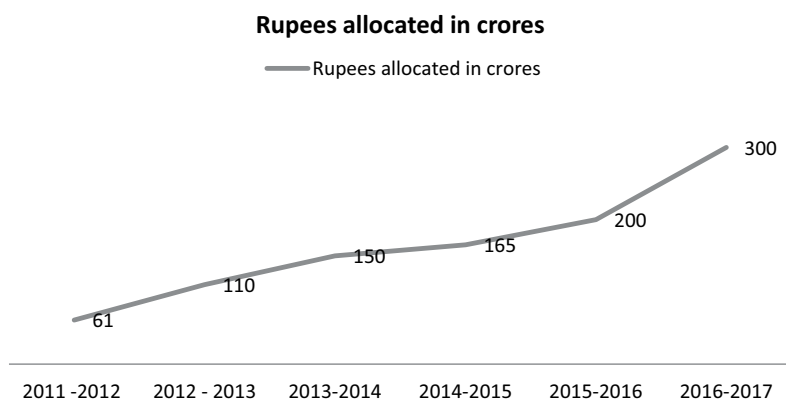


Figure 2.3 Budget allocation to the Department of Information and Culture Affairs, GoWB, over the years

Source: computed from Budget statements, accessed from www.wbfin.nic.in



Figure 2.4 A village fair got sponsorship from Sub-division branch of Information and Culture Department, GoWB, in 2014. On the right-hand side the Department of Agriculture is also seen as participating

Source: photograph taken by the author

offered a discount on the electricity bill associated with the festival. However, it was difficult for the TMC-led state government to manage the Muharram rally and Durgotsav idol immersion procession on the same day in 2016 and 2017. The government issued an order to prevent the idol immersion procession on the day of Muharram. In 2016, one of the BJP supporters filed a petition opposing this move at Calcutta High Court. GoWB was criticised heavily with strong words as this: “There has been a clear endeavour on the part of the State Government to pamper and appease the minority section of the public at the cost of the majority section without there being any plausible justification” (Chattopadhyay, 2018a). Its impact has been massive, which could never surpass the reports of RSS-BJP plan to incite communal violence centring around the two rallies (see, for example, Dasgupta, 2017). The cultural misrecognition-based politics, especially during the second term of TMC’s rule, has far-reaching impact on the public sphere. As we will see in most of the following chapters, West Bengal has opened the “Pandora’s box” of competitive communalism and mutual hatred.

[illegible]

Figure 2.5 A letter written by Md. Abdul Quader Sardar in 2017 to the Minister-in-Charge, Food, GoWB, requesting him to make provisions for monthly allowance to the Hindu priests. This, according to him, was required to avoid the communalisation of state-framed policies. The letter was written after an intensive riot in Basirhat-Baduria, North 24 Parganas district took place (see Chapter 6)

These policies as structural mechanisms shaped much of the public sphere, its perception of the government and the political party which is running it. Added to this was a substantive rise of the Hindutva forces that successfully created a construct like “*Hindu Khatre mein hain*” (Hindus are in danger in West Bengal under Mamata’s rule).

Notes

- 1 The committee was formed when alleged Maoist attack on Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Ram Vilas Paswan happened in 2009. The Ministers’ convoy narrowly escaped but called for eventual police action in and around Salboni, Paschim Medinipur. Lalgarh movement was born out of the police atrocities, which had Maoist backing.
- 2 They brought back the service delivery-based politics after they sensed a possible loss of electoral support with the rise of BJP in 2019 Parliamentary elections. Schemes like Duare Sarkar (service at your door) and Universal health insurance are some of the examples of such service delivery-oriented politics.
- 3 Santal people have a three-tier traditional political system. It begins at the village-level *Sholo-aana* meeting headed by *Majhi* formed by each of the family heads. It is followed by *Pargana* headed by the *Parganayat* which constitutes several *Sholo-aana* in a region. There is a *Disam* over the *Pargana* which is the largest conglomerate. Any conflict, dispute or other issues not getting resolved at *Sholo-aana* can reach upto *Disam* level.

THE CHANGING TRAJECTORIES IN BENGAL VIOLENCE

From party to identity

State-level policies and political use of communal symbols were increasingly assuming a sectarian form within a few years of the TMC rule. It has had a lasting effect on the public sphere of West Bengal. Policies and nature of governance mechanism are embedded within the particular socio-cultural field and carry symbolic meanings to the people at the receiving end. Policies are productive, performative and contested as they create new webs of meanings through the creation of new relations, identities, political subjects and social spaces. Such dimensions of policy are best explored using ethnography (Shore and Wright, 2011). As an anthropologist, I attempt to find out how people made sense out of this relatively new form of politics using cultural misrecognition, embodied through policies and acted out in everyday practices. I have explored nature and impact of communal politics over the public sphere by studying religious and politico-religious riots at different parts of the state. I have taken politics both in a popular sense as some kind of movement, protests, boycotts and factionalism and also as something to with policies and decisions as part of governance mechanism articulated through systems of governance (Shore and Wright, 1997). On the one hand, it is the *process* of control, allocation, production and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities (Ball, 1993; Leftwich, 1984; Miller, 1993; Stoker, 1995). Conceptually, the resources can include anything which is finite and scarce both tangible (like goods and services) and intangible (e.g. power, prestige). The *practices* regarding production, distribution and uses of such resources range from cooperation and collaboration to discussions and debates. People bargain, compromise and also engage in conflicts and violence to exercise their choice and control. As we will see in West Bengal in both of these senses, politics is undergoing a kind of paradigm shift from party-based mobilisation to identity-based mobilisation, from partisan violence to communal violence. I will trace such a paradigm shift in this chapter.

Communal violence replacing partisan violence

West Bengal has one of the highest numbers of political conflicts and related deaths in India. During the LF tenure, quoting an Assembly procedure, Bandyopadhyay (2010) shows that from 1977 to 1996, a total of 28,000 political murders were committed, which simply means one political murder in every six hours. Around 2009/2010, West Bengal ranked four among the 16 most affected states in terms of Maoist violence. It resulted in 640 deaths from 2005 till December 26, 2010 (Swami, 2010; SATP, 2011). Mamata Banerjee in 2010 denied the existence of Maoists and pointed to CPIM-supported armed mercenaries popularly termed as “*Harmad Bahini*,” to be responsible for unrest and killing in the *Junglemahal*, the forested districts of the state (The Hindu, 2010). Consequently, she demanded an immediate retreat of Central Reserved Police Forces (CRPF) and their joint operation with state police (also referred to as joint force) against Maoists (Indian Express, 2010). Sharing the dais with PCPA, arguably a Maoist frontal organisation in February 2009 made many perceive her as a Maoist sympathiser. Later on after her win in assembly election in 2011, TMC supremo increasingly disassociated herself from the Maoists as she kept silent about her pre-election promises a) withdrawal of security forces and b) unconditional release of all political prisoners (Chattopadhyay, 2011). In 2011, TMC initiated a talk and peace restoration process with the Maoists through the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), which was failed, and on November 24, 2011, the legendary Maoist leader Kisenji was killed in Burisol forest, Paschim Medinipur. By 2012 March to April, most of the known Maoist leaders surrendered, which the Chief Minister portrayed as *Jungle Mahal haschhe* – Forested districts are smiling (Nath, 2020b; Sengupta, 2016). In a longitudinal study on political violence, I have shown (Nath, 2020b) the existence of an everydayness of village-level political conflict which gets escalated during the time of election. While GPs have experienced substantive importance in changing rural Bengal, it also became the centre of conflict and often ended up in large-scale violence. There exists a section of “professional” hooligans in conflict zones who can “execute” violence of any form.

While the state with its rich history of political violence had all the actors and agencies ready to execute any form of violence, sectarian politics and policies started gaining prominence. The direct outcome of such policies and changing nature of politics was an increase in the number of riots over the years (see Figure 3.1).

After 2017 the number of riots started to fall, but low-intense conflicts at different conflict zones kept continuing. Some of the low-intense violence have also seen occasional spur. I have discussed these issues in Chapters 4

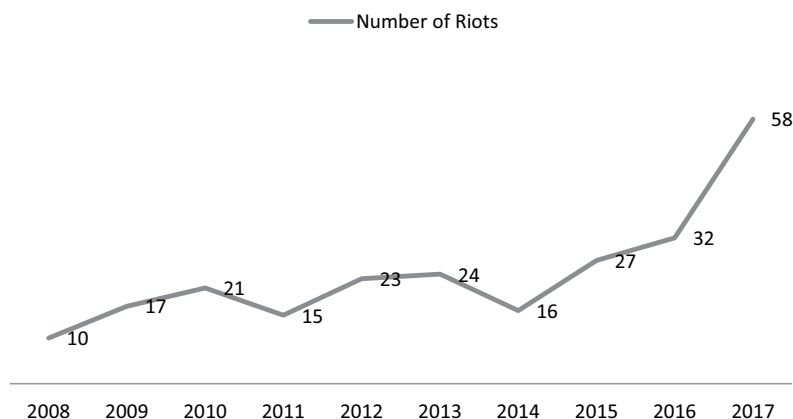


Figure 3.1 Number of riots in West Bengal since 2008

Source: Replies to Parliament¹

and 6. Here, for your reference, I have given a list of some of the major riots (Table 3.1).

It is important to note that since 2014, there is an increasing tendency of violence around primordial issues. As Table 3.1 suggests, most of the riots have certain common features:

- a Mostly, they are well organised by existing identity-based and political organisations.
- b There is a definite political orientation and aim of the identity-based organisations involved.
- c A tendency to attack local administration is noted, and mostly (as we will see in the coming chapters) there are allegations against administrative inaction during and after riots.
- d Destruction and looting of private properties especially shops are symptoms of increasing involvement of opportunistic goons in riots.
- e Deliberated attempt to polarise people's mind is noted as riots are often organised from religious processions or because of defaming religious figures and places.
- f Ideal Hindu–Muslim prototypes and mutual constructs of disrespect have proliferated along with the riots.
- g Trivial issues like road accident-led riot indicate an existence of strong mutual disrespect and revenge-seeking mentality.

I have studied some of the important riots through intensive ethnography to unravel the kind of political spectrum Bengal has entered into (see

Table 3.1 A list of some of the major communal conflicts since 2010 in West Bengal

<i>Date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Organisation base</i>	<i>Target/Impact</i>	<i>Number of Deaths</i>
2010	6th Sept Deganga, North 24 Pdns	Land related conflict linked with graveyard and place for Hindu worship	TMC-Muslim versus BJP-Hindu	Shops, houses and place of worship vandalised. CRPF deployed	1
2013	19-20 February Canning, South 24 Pdns	Murder of a Maulvi	Various Hindu and Muslim groups	Shops, houses were vandalised	2
2014	21 October Bhagwanpur, Purba Medinipur	Unknown men set fire to a madarasa student, he survived	Unknown	Communal tension. Local TMC leaders blaming BJP for the incident	0
2015	January 27-29, 2015 Usti, South 24 Pdns	Idol immersion of Hindu Goddess Saraswati, alternatively a Hindu couple being harassed by Muslims	Hindu Jagaran Mancha, Hindu Sanhati, Bhabani Sena and BJP versus Muslim supporters of TMC	About 50 shops were looted and set ablaze, houses vandalised. Attack on police with bullets and crude bombs. Several injured	0
	May 4, 2015 Kaliagunj, Nadia	Taking Hindu procession through a Muslim religious place	Several pro-Hindu and pro-Islamic organisations	Destruction of private properties belonging to both the communities	4
2016	3 January Kaliachak, Malda	Hindu Mahasabha leaders' derogatory comments against Islam (see Chapter 4)	Islamic organisations	Destruction of police station	0
	15 January Mayureswar, Birbhum	A truck full of smuggled sand met an accident allegedly killing a person	Local Hindu and Muslim groups	Attack on police station, destruction of private properties including vehicles	0

(Continued)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Organisation base</i>	<i>Target/Impact</i>	<i>Number of Deaths</i>
1 March	Ilambazar, Birbhum	Facebook post defaming Nabi	Sangh Parivar versus Jamaat and TMC-supported Muslim	Attack on police station, road blockade	1
28–29 May	Chandrakona, Paschim Medinipur	Began with eve-teasing. Underlying long-term conflict between Hindu and Muslims related to a mosque construction	BJP and Sangh Parivar versus TMC	Shops destroyed and looted Vehicles torched	0
12–27 June	Mandirbazar, South 24 Pgs.	Conflict with the use of loudspeakers in adjacent temple and mosque. Police stopped the loudspeaker of the temple	Hindu Sanhati, Hindu Jagaran Mancha, VHP, and BJP versus Muslim supporters of TMC	Shops are vandalised and looted. Hindus expressed disgust with local Muslim MLA's role	0
2016 12 October	Naihai-Hajinagar, North 24 Pgs	Durgostav idol immersion and Muharram-related conflict (see Chapter 6)	BJP versus TMC, involvement of jute industry-related conflicts	Destruction of properties, Shops looted, religious places were vandalised	0
April and October	Chandannagar, Hooghly	Ram Navami-led conflict and Durgotsav idol immersion and Muharram conflict (see Chapter 6)	ShivSena, VHP versus TMC	Destruction of shops and some private properties	0
11–12 October	Kharagpur, Paschim Medinipur	Road accident-led mob lynching of a Hindu driver led to religious conflict. Clashes during Ran Navami and Muharram	BJP versus TMC, involvement of local goons	Shops were vandalised. Party offices of both BJP and TMC suffered from vandalisation	0

13–14 October	Kaligram, chanchal, Malda	Vijaya Dashami immersion procession versus Muharram Tazia-led conflict	Not clear if there was a political involvement	Private properties and shops were vandalised, attack on religious places	0
13–15 December	Dhulagar, Howrah	Attack on Milad-ul-nabi celebration, a land- related conflict	Sangha versus Jamaat	Shops were vandalised, a few houses set ablaze	0
December 2016	Katwa, Purba Bardhaman	Beef kept at a Kali Temple	Not known	Hindu–Muslim clashes	0
January 2017	Uluberia, Howrah	Celebration of Milad- ul-nabi and Saraswati Puja in a school led to a conflict.	Local Hindu–Muslim groups formed by guardians and related others	School was vandalised	0
23–29 January	Metiaburuj, Alampur, Kolkata Port area	Allegedly someone threw beef at a temple	Local Hindu and Muslim groups	Road blockade	0
5–6 April	Khidirpur area, Kolkata	Armed Ram Navami rally, sloganeering against Muslims	Local Hindu and Muslim groups	Tension raised but peace prevailed as local administration quickly involved local Hindu and Muslim groups for a peace meeting	0
July	Baduria-Basirhat, North 24 pgnos.	Derogatory Facebook post against Prophet Muhammad (see Chapter 6)	Sangha, TMC and Jamaat	Shops vandalised and looted, destruction of private properties	1
2015, 2018– continuing	Regularly continuing	Ram Navami led conflicts, Change of political affiliation of key political leader (see Chapter 6)	BJP versus TMC along the communal line	Destruction of private properties, rail blockade	7
2018	Asansol-Raniganj	Ram Navami led riot (see Chapter 6)	VHP, RSS, BJP	Destruction of private properties	1
2020	Telinipara, Chandannagar, Hooghly	Covid-19-led spread of misinformation, identify- ing Muslims are careers.	Not clear	Destruction of private properties.	??

Source: prepared with the author's over-the-year experience of studying riots along with organisations like AAMRA ek Sachetan Prayas Forum

Chapters 4–6). Before going to my ethnographic works on the riots in West Bengal, I wish to focus briefly on the issues which have made identity-based polarisation possible at present.

Changing political spectrum in West Bengal

Along with over the year increase of TMC's popularity in state politics, BJP, erstwhile a rather insignificant political force, began to grow in recent times. The 2019 Parliamentary election virtually made BJP the unofficial opposition of the state which soon became the official opposition in the assembly election 2021 (Figure 3.2).

From the simple arithmetic calculation, it appears that a large part of LF vote was transferred to BJP as presumably a section of people found BJP as their new protector from TMC (see also *The Times of India*, 2019). It is worth recalling the 2018 Panchayat election which partly explains the possible reasons for such large-scale vote transfer. The 2018 panchayat election has seen an unprecedented violence. The percentage of uncontested seats has been all-time high (Figure 3.3). Apparently, the TMC cadres didn't allow other party representatives to even file the nominations. Court intervention was required, which allowed the Election Commission to accept nomination via email (*Economic Times*, 2018). As Sen (2018) and Chattopadhyay (2018b) note, three district-level panchayats were won by TMC uncontested and about 34% of seats were won uncontested across the three tiers. "State Election Commission data shows a three and six times rise in the number of uncontested seats in 2018 when one compares the 2018 data with the previous election in 2013 and the last election under Left rule in 2008 respectively" (Nath, 2020b, p. 282).

Regular clashes resulting in death and blood shedding continued for months even after the election result was declared, in which as expected

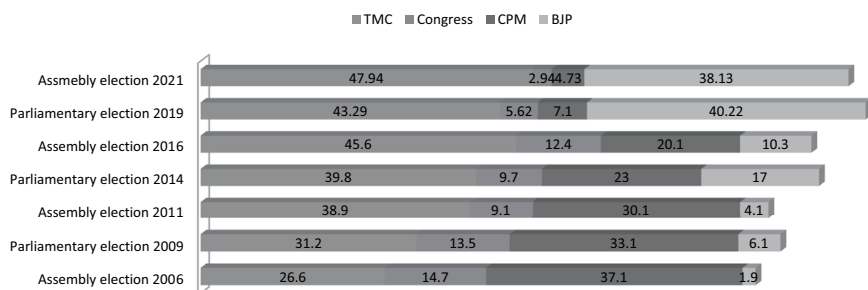


Figure 3.2 Vote percentage share of different political parties in West Bengal since 2006

Source: Election Commission of India, indiavotes.com and newspaper reports

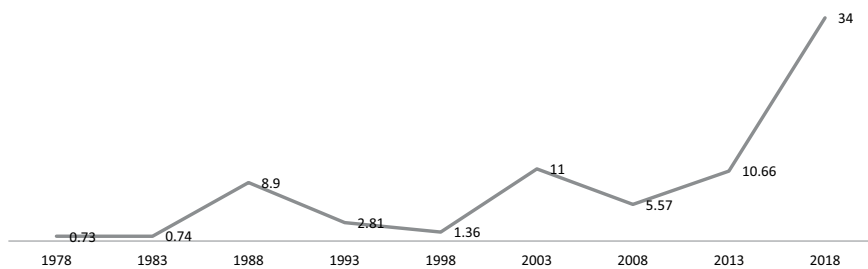


Figure 3.3 Percentage of uncontested seats in Panchayat elections over the years across the three tiers

Source: State Election Commission data, see also Nath, 2020b; Chattopadhyay, 2018b.

TMC gained a massive victory and BJP scored second pushing away the secular democratic forces like the LF and Congress.

I wish to recall my ethnographic experience with absconded LF workers in Goaltor in this context. Since 2010–2011, the LF cadres and local leaders had to leave their villages because of the Maoist attack. In 2011, several villagers were killed by armed mercenaries in Netai, Paschim Medinipur (now under Jhargram District). These armed mercenaries were kept by the LF, especially the CPIM to protect their leaders from Maoist attacks. This incident has made it even more difficult for the LF workers to come back after years of political change (The Times of India, 2014). I met such absconded LF leaders inside a rice warehouse, near Salboni railway station. One of them, Gour Dasgupta, was in charge of the unit hiding inside the warehouse. He kept taking phone calls and calling up people in and around to know the whereabouts of the region. As I spent a couple of days with them, I could see that a constant sense of insecurity was the major issue that they had to deal with. They had small bags which they could easily pack and move out if there is any possibility of attack from the Maoists or TMC. Although over the years this sense of insecurity receded, many of them could only come back to their villages after a substantive rise of BJP in their villages. For example, people who lived in the warehouse had to leave Salboni for years and could only come back once a strong BJP organisation was visible in 2015–2016 inside of their villages. People like Gour Dasgupta found BJP as the new protector of their life and properties.

The popular support transfer from the LF to BJP must be seen in two different angles, first, in terms of the practices of sectarian politics by both TMC and BJP, and second, with respect to the organisation system of the two parties. LF as vividly discussed by scholars like Chatterjee (2004), Bhattacharyya (2009, 2016) and Nath (2018, 2020a) among others had a strong party

system. Even during the systematic attack by the Maoists on LF leaders, the party machinery could arrange for the later maligned *Harmad Bahini* – the counter-protecting forces. However, with their defeat in 2011, the organisational grid disappeared rapidly. TMC focusing more on cultural misrecognition has never taken adequate initiative to build up a party structure. They, as I have shown before (Nath, 2017, 2018), rather attempted to free the public sphere from the strictly followed party grid installed by the LF. Ray and Dutta (2017) have mentioned about an organisational vacuum through which BJP started to step in at places in West Bengal, especially at Junglemahal. After the 2019 Parliamentary election results were announced, LF could reclaim hundreds of its party offices which were forcefully captured by TMC after 2011. Ghosh (2019) reports that most of these party offices are located in constituencies won by the BJP. He quotes one of the CPIM cadres in Duttapukur, North 24 Parganas, saying, “Since the election results have come out, Trinamool’s situation has become bad and we are taking advantage of this . . . local BJP leaders are backing us from behind. They (the BJP) told us that if anything happens, we are with you.” Findings such as this one indicate that a) BJP was becoming a new protector under which a chunk of the TMC’s opposition forces tends to organise and act, b) the organisation vacuum created by TMC is beginning to end with the rise of new organisation-based politics, primarily formulated by the BJP and c) a large section of the politically active people prioritised safety and protection over party. Does it indicate a final end to the party society? We have to seek an answer in near future.

The new organisations around sectarian politics

There are enough reflections of organisational-level mobilisation at the grassroots which was begun with party society during the LF, went through an attempt to replace organisation building by powerful leaders by TMC, and now to another phase of organisational resurgence with the rise of BJP. Ray and Dutta (2017) point out the “hyper-development” activities by TMC at the erstwhile Maoist-affected violence-prone regions as alienating. They argue that there is a need to bring back the embedded leaderships to address the issues of distributive justice. Ray (2020) and Daniyal (2018) further this argument showing that organisational vacuum is quickly started to be filled in with a variety of pro-Hindutva organisations.

Since 2013, BJP has expanded their organisational base in West Bengal relatively rapidly. In different districts of West Bengal, I have encountered a variety of organisations having some connections with RSS, Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and henceforth with BJP. I have encountered about 30 different organisations connected within this organisational grid. While names such as VHP, Bajrang Dal – the youth wing of VHP, Hindu Jagaran Manch, Sewa Bharati, Vidya Bharati and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram for the Tribal facilitating the absorption of tribals into the Hindu umbrella through

Gharwapasi are well known, there are many lesser-known organisations like Vanavandhu Parishad, Durga Shakti/Vahini (young women wing), Hindu Yuva Vahini (young men wing), Sahakara Bharati (Cooperative wing), Sam-skar Bharati (Cultural wing), Arogya Foundation of India (medical wing for tribals) and Ekal Vidyalaya (Schools and coaching centre) both part of Ekal Abhiyan and a variety of localised temple-based organisations loosely connected with VHP have constituted a rather “colourful” array of organisations. Their synchronisation is commendable. I have seen in places like Purulia, and Bankura local, relatively clean personalities are given charge of the grassroots organisations. It is not mandatory for them to have an RSS training, but they are supposed to report to the Mandali – regional office bearer who is invariably an RSS-trained person. I have seen several Left, Congress and even TMC cadres finding it difficult to relate these organisations with the politics of BJP. Even in places like Naihati, North 24 Parganas, TMC workers sitting inside their party office have argued that despite being a TMC worker, they find no conflict in participating in activities organised by RSS as they are Hindus by birth. In the 2019 Parliamentary election, a silent grassroots movement tapping this “colourful” array of organisation BJP could implement what they called “*Meri booth sabse Majboot*” (my booth is the strongest). With the rise of BJP’s popularity, cadre base and synergy in organising different programmes like celebration of Janmasthami or Ram Navami, TMC’s rather chaotic party organisation loaded with confusing chain of command looked relatively ineffective. One of the TMC leaders in Asansol before the 2019 parliamentary election says “BJP has so many mechanisms to convert support base into votes. We are yet to have such organisational strength. We all know that TMC without Mamata is nothing, it’s a tough fight.”

A more or less similar mechanism is developed among the Bengali Muslims at different corners of the state. Ahmed (1987), working on the history of Muslims in Bengal, argued that in their socio-cultural life, the Bengali Muslims are distinct. They are quite close to the non-Muslim population of the region than to the Muslims living elsewhere in the subcontinent. The Islamic mobilisation has an all-encompassing feature most prominently professed through mushrooming unregistered madrasas, increasingly consolidated Sharia followers through organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, an offshoot of Jamaat-e-Islami founded during British India by Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi. While their ideological framework was to go beyond the West-focused right-left debate and establish political Islam, in its everyday mobilisation, they inspire Muslims to become “more Muslims.” What Maududi believed and what much of the Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb’s idea constitute are quite similar. They believed that through the preservation of doctrinal purity, they can challenge and overcome Western hegemony (Maher, 2016). The challenge for the construction of an Islamic monolith in West Bengal comes from two major sources, viz.,

a) from the Western hegemonic dominance and b) from the folk Islam which is complex, multilayered and assimilation of open local traditions that fulfil the everyday needs of the people. Over the years, there is a slow but steady attempt to construct an Islamic monolith in West Bengal. It is violence ridden, and it can claim its success as they have converted several syncretic traditions of Pir-Fakir-Sufi centres to prayer halls and/or mosques. Perhaps one can cite the most popular Pir centres of Furfura Sharif which is now involved in actively negotiating a political space of its own (Bhattacharya, 2020b). The purifying movement initiated by the Faraizis and Wahabis during the first half of the nineteenth century aiming at removing non-Islamic practices is still continuing in a variety of names assuming various forms. Jamaat is becoming a household name among Bengali Muslims. It is symptomatic of the growth of Islamic fundamentalism creating an ever-increasing potential for religious conflicts.

The post-truth moment and the IT cell

The traditional mode of political polarisation through large riots was the norm until a few decades ago. It is now replaced by lynching and/or small-scale localised forms of riots. In both cases, a combination of false information and existing communal sentiment is used to instigate violence. It is difficult to pinpoint the organisational bases of such mechanism, but there are newspaper reports mentioning the use of Information Technology (popularly IT cell) to spread political agenda which is limited not only to spreading of fake information mixed with existing community sentiments but also to manufacture riot (National Herald, 2017; The Telegraph, 2019). In 2019, an investigative journalist Swati Chaturvedi unearthed the intricate details of how BJP is associated with the internet-based troll army – people who are paid to spread misinformation and hatred. BJP is using social media to spread pro-Hindutva, anti-Islamic, anti-Dalit, anti-freedom, anti-women, lynching-inspiring propaganda at grand scale. They have also used their mechanism to troll even smallest of the voices which criticised the government policies or the party. Fashionable tags like #Urban_Naxal, #Antinational and #Tukde_Tukde_Gang have been made “viral” to influence public opinion bypassing the traditional media (Chaturvedi, 2019). During the election, this mechanism continued at a rapid pace as The Telegraph (2019) reports BJP had 50,000 WhatsApp groups under their control and about 10,000 employees dedicated only in West Bengal. The spread of a particular ideology inclined messages, (mis)information continues throughout the year at a low intensity (Nath and Ray, forthcoming). Some of the major functions that the repeated spreading of false information do include a) to subvert the truthfulness of facts, b) to use confirmation bias of the people and make them emotional about a particular issue, c) to establish lie as an “alternative” fact carrying emotional appeal and finally d) to completely

dissolve the boundaries between truthfulness and falsity, fact and belief, reality and fantasy. This particular condition once achieved can be termed as the conditions of post-truth – a situation when objective facts become less important to the belief, confirmation bias and feeling or emotion (McIntyre, 2018).

I see post-truth as a uniquely developed structural phenomenon that is designed to serve, among others, the purpose of politico-religious polarisation in India. It began with cultivating Hindu–Muslim divide with messages filled with morphed images and chilling videos of atrocities. These videos were collections from different formal media sources which aired such images or videos as news items at different times. Some are directly copied from Hindi movies including some of the popular movies like *Bombay* which portrayed a riot (Nath and Ray, forthcoming). People's general ignorance about the history, especially the post-colonial history, has been a fact because of two reasons. First of all, subjects like History, Political Science and other humanities are never seen as job-fetching disciplines, hence lesser emphasis is given on them by the people during their early school education. Second, the school-level education doesn't really offer any detail on the post-colonial history of India. It didn't make much of a difference in the public sphere before the advent of social media. As people until the smartphone revolution happened accessed news only from a handful of newspapers. Ray et al. (2018) and Nath and Ray (forthcoming) have shown that in West Bengal, there is a paradigm shift in people's access to information via media. In the 2016 Assembly election, about 60% of the respondents (among 4,360 participants) mentioned accessing newspaper and only 1% using social media to get information related to politics. It changed substantially in 2019 as about 25% of the people reported accessing information related to politics via social media especially WhatsApp, Facebook and SMS platforms (among 4,335 respondents). This indicates a substantive weakening of the traditional media system and a rise in the social media in a relatively short span of time. The use of social media for accessing information needs to be seen in the context of two phenomena, first, the astronomic rise in the number of smartphones in India (see Figure 3.4).

Second, the launch of high-speed wireless internet technology by Reliance Jio in September 2016, which made India's data cost the lowest in the world. Nath and Ray (forthcoming), using Telecom Regulatory Authority of India data, show that there was a nearly 2200% increase in Jio subscriptions in India. In order to compete, other companies made their data pack available at a competitive price, ultimately making the internet data virtually free. By 2017, people started using their mobile phones in a completely different way. They could easily stream videos, upload and exchange large files and play online games without worrying much about data consumption. I remember in 2017 being asked about their reasons for mobile phone

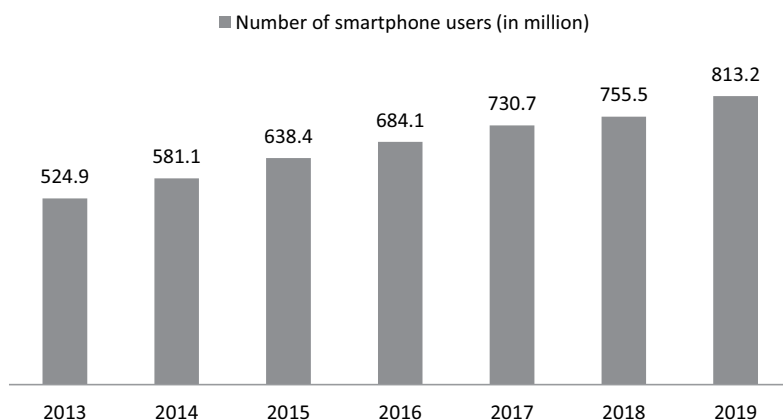


Figure 3.4 Year-to-year increase in the number (in millions) of smartphone users in India

Source: statistica.com, 2019 data till August 2019, URL: www.statista.com/statistics/274658/forecast-of-mobile-phone-users-in-india/

addiction, a student replied “sir, we must consume the data we pay for!” Understandably consuming 1–1.5 gigabytes of data per day became one of the aims. People not only consumed data but also created and passed on information at a large scale. With social media platform being radically “democratic,” presumably everyone’s opinions started to have an impact, no matter how small it can be. This is also the moment when fake and misleading information started to bombard people and manufactured their opinion. The opinion manufacturing has not been so blatant, one-sided and mostly fake or misleading before because traditional media houses could not just get away projecting anything at random. On the other hand, fake information can be easily floated, circulated and if strongly protested can be taken back only to reappear in some future time with a slight change in the content. Scholars like Bene (2017) and Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) have shown that contents carrying emotions travel extremely fast in social media. The net result is a cumulative effect on the public sphere which remains for a very long time. The word post-truth became the Oxford word of the year in 2016, the same year when Reliance Jio was launched.² This simply means that the ground was prepared and the means of spreading misinformation at a rapid pace was now available. It could easily move people with a common lack of historical knowledge base but having a strong sense of emotion. Needless to mention it is an ideal preconditioning for the upwardly mobile middle class of the present generation. It is in this context that the spread of fake and/or misleading information has been

systematically channelised to create a structural backdrop to mould people's perception of reality, which includes political choices as well.

* * *

By 2014–2015, West Bengal had already begun to experience the outcome of a combination of a) violence ingrained past, b) proliferation of organisations inspiring sectarian feeling and politics, c) policies to fuel sectarianism and d) a strong presence of the moment of post-truth. While the rising number of riots (Figure 3.1) was a matter of concern, there was little attempt to understand them thoroughly. Scholars like Kanungo (2015), Roy (2017), Nath and Roy Chowdhury (2019a, 2019b) and Nath (forthcoming) studied and reported the fact that communal politics was gaining ground in West Bengal. Hindutva sentiments have been seeping through a variety of cultural expressions which can best be termed as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983): practices such as the mock stick fight sessions in RSS-organised fitness training camps and invention of Ganga Aarati in 2012 at places in Hooghly. There is also a parallel process of dishonouring the syncretic traditions like the demeaning of Chasma Babar Mazar or attack on Pir followers in Rejinagar further damaged communal harmony (Nath and Roy Chowdhury, 2019b). Since 2016, Ram Navami and Muharram rallies became aggressive at many places where Hindus and Muslims have lived peacefully for centuries. BJP's crowd-pulling Ram Navami rally compelled TMC to compete with BJP in gaining Hindu support. In doing so, they have also started celebrating Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti on a large scale. In 2018, several riots took place from such rallies at different corners of the state including Asansol in Paschim Bardhaman and Bhatpara in North 24 Parganas (Majumdar, 2018). Political symbols began to change. While earlier West Bengal had seen posters and computer-printed flexes depicting political leaders, especially Mamata Banerjee standing with intellectuals, now political posters depicted Hindu gods and PM Modi in saffron, while the Chief Minister continued to portray her Hijab-clad appearance.

As organisations along the sectarian politics grew over the years, West Bengal felt the consequences of the rise of fundamentalism. One of the relatively less discussed issues of communalism is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The next chapter, based on my ethnographic experience, addresses this issue and indicates in what ways Islamic fundamentalism has remained unaddressed in both popular and scholarly works on West Bengal.

Notes

- 1 The calculation is based on data gathered from these websites linked to the Parliament of India <http://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/annex/14/AU590.pdf>, <http://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/annex/12/AU3586.pdf> <http://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/annex/12/AU3586.pdf>

47.193/Annexture_New/lsq16/3/au1606.htm http://164.100.47.193/Annexture_New/lsq15/13/au6502.htm http://164.100.47.193/Annexture_New/lsq15/5/au2545.htm.

- 2 The word Post-Truth becoming the word of the year declared by Oxford English Dictionary indicates the global nature of the phenomenon of fake news and a [purposive] weakening of objectively accessible truth. Post-Truth. In Oxford English Dictionary. Available online: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth> (accessed on 17th February 2018).

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND AN INNOCENT IGNORANCE

From January 2010 to June 2016, I used to stay in the port city of Haldia. My place of stay for the weekdays was the faculty hostel of Haldia Government College. By June 2010, the vacant land surrounding the college campus was occupied by shanty hutments. These were built from discarded materials ranging from scrapped car parts and beer bottles to large flex prints. Some of us out of our inquisitiveness enquired to know that they were the displaced people from places like Nandigram, where political violence was rampant. They also stated that they had to flee because of atrocities committed by TMC and that they were CPIM supporters. Haldia was “ruled” by the veteran CPIM leader Laxman Seth. They commonly pointed to the fact that they could stay there and survive because of Mr. Seth. Trucks carrying iron ores, bauxite and raw sugar used to stop near the college building because of heavy traffic. We witnessed that even in broad daylight, people from the shanties looted such materials and smuggled. Many of us thought that they would eventually leave the inhospitable place. Over the years, we saw that they brought their families and children to settle down permanently. They came in hundreds, built their homes, dug up ponds and built muddy alleyways. By 2015, they got electricity connections and we understood they were going to stay there, perhaps forever. Within a few years, we found that a *Jamatkhana* was built for *Namaaz* prayer. By 2016, it became the only concrete structure of the *Bustee* and they began to use loudspeakers to play the *Azaan* – the Islamic ritual prayers. I remember waking up early in the morning when the sound of morning prayer used to come from distant places; in 2016, it started to come from the nearby *Jamatkhana*. From 2015 onwards, they started Islamic Jalsa and Julush. In those programmes, local Islamic leaders – the *Hujur* come and deliver dos and don’ts according to the Sharia. They are super performers and can continue chanting those dos and don’ts for the hours. I remember such programmes were extremely noisy and disturbing. Because of close proximity, they sounded nothing more than a rap song sang in a strange tune. I tried to listen to them and found that while there are prescriptions for good Muslims, there are also

prescriptions for those who are not Muslims. The prescriptions for the non-Muslims range from avoiding them to killing them.

In 2014, a blast occurred in Khagragarh, Bardhaman, at a two-storey building owned by Nurul Hasan Chowdhury, a TMC leader. The ground floor of the same building was the ruling TMC party office. Two suspected militants died on the spot and improvised explosive devices were recovered. As National Investigative Agency took over the case, they filed a charge sheet in 2015 putting emphasis on the fact that it was a “conspiracy of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, Bangladesh, to overthrow the existing democratic government in Bangladesh through violent terrorist acts” (The Hindu, 2019). Sheikh Hasina, the PM of Bangladesh, was quick to respond and emphatically put forth the fact that since their government is dealing with anti-Indian militants, India should also reciprocate (Chattopadhyay, 2014). BJP quickly built up a strong narrative that police failed to catch the terrorists before as they were “sheltered” by the TMC leaders. They pasted posters asking people to unite and build *Jihadi-Mukta-Bangla*.

Fast-forward to 2020. There was outrage both in India and in Bangladesh as the Bangladesh cricket star Shakib Al Hasan ceremonially opened up a Hindu puja pandal in the northern neighbourhood of Kankurgachhi on 12 November in Kolkata. He received death threats in his home and offered a public apology for being present in a Hindu Puja pandal. The Hindutva organisations made it an issue to show how strong Islamic fundamentalism has become in Bangladesh and how unsafe Hindus are in our neighbouring country while West Bengal is continuing their Muslim appeasement. Bajrang Dal and VHP spearheaded protests in Kolkata and at several districts towns like Tamluk in Purba Medinipur, Rampurhat in Birbhum and Asansol in Paschim Bardhaman. Their programmes were video recorded and then spread through their Facebook pages claiming that the Hindus from every country are brothers and that they are against the rising Islamic fundamentalism (Bhattacharya, 2020b).

The Islamic twists in Bengal

Although the history and genesis of Wahhabism and Salafism as two forces restoring conservatism and purifying Islamic faith are well known to be dramatically opposite to the Sufi-Pir ideology of openness, Islam in Bengal in practice does not follow this dichotomy. Blanchard (2008, p. CRS2) observes, “Since its emergence, Wahhabism’s puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups. Wahhabism opposes most popular Islamic religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, most core Shiite traditions, and some practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism.” An understanding of such dichotomy in practice requires a close engagement with people and their practices. In Bourdieu’s terms (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), it is

important to look at people's "practice" and "strategy." People's everyday practices form part of their culture which is neither a free choice nor structurally fixed. They are rather shaped by a practical sense acquired by people through their socialisation practices. Hence, even during a life-threatening conflict with the Shariya followers, a Sufi following women reflects – "How can we know what is written in Quran? We do not have the intellectual capacity to decode what is written, or what is their meaning? That is why we go to Pirs. They explain them in our language. They show us the right path. They advise us to co-exist with all faiths peacefully" (recorded in July 2018). While there are instances of conflicts between the Shariya followers (Shariyati in local term) and Sufi followers (Pirpanthi in local term), people in their everyday life do not really bother to see this difference. This ignorance is one of the key factors helping solidification of Islam by wiping off relatively syncretic practices like Sufism.

Some of the snapshot studies which me and my friends from AAMRA ek sachetan prayas forum did include a forceful conversion of Sufi centre at Pandua, Hooghly. Here the age-old traditions followed by the Sufi followers of the *Mazar* of Shah Sufi Sultan have experienced a stiff resistance from a well-organised mosque-based religio-political group Jamiyet Ulemaye Hind. They constructed a mosque and Khariji Madrasa adjacent to the Mazar and imposed restrictions on the entrance of women and people belonging to other faith inside the Mazar and the grave. During the fieldwork, I came to know that the Imam of the mosque is very close to the then TMC leader and cabinet minister of GoWB Siddiqullah Chowdhury. It was because of the political support extended by TMC and local administration that the Sufi followers and the Khadem of the Mazar Lal Muhammad had to remain a mere spectator of such transformation. In a group discussion in 2010, Lal Muhammad and some others argued that the newly built mosque and the Khariji Madrasa have used the name of Shah Sufi Sultan to make them acceptable to the local Muslims. Common people, especially people originally belonging to Bihar, do feel the encroachment as an injustice, but they leave the issue as *niji mamla* – i.e. a personal matter of the mosque and Mazar. In practice as the local Muslims go to both the places, apart from a handful minority of ardent followers, no one else including the local administration bothers to interfere. Lal Muhammad said that he was forced to sign a non-judiciary stamp paper stating that there is no conflict between mosque and Mazar.

The extent to which such conversion could go is exemplified in Hulaspur village of Murshidabad on July 25, 2019. Arguably a two-century-old Mazar belonging to that of Pir Badar was demolished by Shariya followers. They have constructed a minar to convert it into an Eidgah. On August 12, 2019, first Namaaz was offered from the Eidgah, which brought to an end to the syncretic practices. During the fieldwork, we could see a strong association between local politics and conversion. The Shariya followers not

only outnumbered the Sufi followers but also managed to get political and administrative support behind them. Md. Ashique, the present legal owner of the Mazar land, reports that despite his police complaints, no action against the accused has been taken so far. Akbar da (Akbar Ali Sheikh, the secretary to Baul-Fakir Sangha, an organisation fighting for the rights of Bauls and Fakirs) argued that this is an outcome of a long-term ideological battle between two different religious traditions.

While these are snapshot studies reflecting on some of the incidents at different corners of the state, I did intensive ethnography on how Islamic fundamentalism is growing in West Bengal at Rejinagar, Murshidabad. I will now discuss what is happening in Rejinagar with some intricate details to reflect on the nature and extent of cultural penetration of Islamic fundamentalism among the Muslims of West Bengal.

Rejinagar–Pirpanthi-Shariyati violence

Rejinagar is a non-conspicuous station on the Eastern Railway branch that connects Lalgola with Ranaghat. It is situated in Murshidabad district which has Muslim majority (66.27%, as per the 2011 census).¹ With a population of about 17,000, Teghori, Paschim Teghori and Nazirpur are three villages located at the South-Eastern side of the Rejinagar station. These villages come under the Andulberia II Gram Panchayat, Beldanga II Panchayat Samiti of Murshidabad. The area comes under Rejinagar Assembly Constituency. The Member of Legislative Assembly at present belongs to the TMC. These villages have only about ten Hindu families and the rest are followers of Islam. When I first went there in 2017 along with AAMRA ek sachetan prayas friends and Akbar da, the presence of extravagant mosques seemed a misfit. People's houses otherwise bore the mark of poverty, kids playing half naked with potbelly appearance bearing one of the most prominent marks of malnutrition. The mosques were something out of place. I later could locate ten mosques with white, neat and clean marble flooring, and domes decked with white and green tiles. There were posters here and there demanding Babri mosque reconstruction and asking all Muslims to unite for the cause. There used to be only an old mosque in the region in the early 80s, but as there was a gradual increase in the number of people, each locale started to build up their own mosques. "There were only three before 2010, but it became ten within the last seven years. As people started migrating in gulf countries money has started to flow, you know" – Sk. Najer told on his way back from a prayer in September 2017. It is beyond the scope of this book to trace the money flow from the gulf. However, it is deeply disturbing to see people's houses and everyday struggling life has been rather same, poverty stricken. It became relatively clear that religion and its everyday impact are quite strong, perhaps getting stronger over the years here. A government-sponsored school, a few unregistered madrasas

and villagers' willingness to send their children to government-sponsored school instead of those madrasas show an inclination towards quality education. One of the local Imams clearly reflected such a trend among the Pirpanthi people. "They are not really interested in saving Islam, our faith. They continue worshipping the Mazars, do sazada, decorate them with flowers, sing and dance around it and all and send their children to government schools. Their kids will never learn Islam, they will remain ignorant." I have encountered several school teachers, a couple of doctors and a handful of engineers doing well in their own field coming out of these villages. One of the villagers proudly reports that in 2017, one of the village boys has qualified for the Medical Entrance Examination and once he completes his studies, this village is going to have three doctors soon.

The main road that connects Rejinagar station with the villages is metalled and has been in good shape. However, roads within the villages are a mix of half-done concrete alleyways and broken brick roads. Most of the houses are concreted but mostly lack plastering let alone painting. Once you step inside, you will encounter people residing in congested houses. Small rooms and barely any ventilation characterise most of the houses. Villagers mostly depend on farming and daily wage earning for their livelihoods. With water being available through Minor Irrigation schemes, farming is still profitable and crops range from rice to a variety of vegetables and potatoes.

These three villages include three of the four major sects of Sufism, viz., Shariat, Marfat and Tariqat. In my everyday discourse with the local people, I didn't find any problem in the co-existence of different faiths. Villagers commonly argue that until 2010, no one was even bothered to know if there is indeed a difference between these different sects, or even between the mosques and Mazars. Hindus in large number used to come and attend Urs and other festivals regularly at different Mazars. Local Pirs claim to have traditional knowledge and have cures for certain ailments. There is a belief among the people of the neighbouring villages across the religion that the Pirs' advice and medicines work. Moreover, the Islamic concept of *Jeen* – the spirits is often seen as true by the neighbouring Hindu people. They were regular visitors to deal with evil spirits that they believe can harm their children, pregnant women and the elderly people.

We used to participate in Namaaz and Urs celebration at each of the Khanqua Sharifs. Kids play around the open space near each of the mazars. We participate in large number in the feasts organised by the Khanqua Sharifs during their Urs. No one ever told us that there is a problem in doing rituals like offering *Chaddar*, flower and incense sticks to the mazars. It is a fairly recent phenomenon that Mosques are issuing fatwa about what we should do and what we should not . . . we are religious people; we don't want to get involved in their fight. But once Mosque loud speakers are used and

they have asked people to stop anti-Islamic practices in Khanqua Sharifs people went out and vandalised their places of worship . . . personally we don't support this. But I don't want to get involved in these problems.

(told by a local Muslim recorded in March 2017, in a Group Discussion, at Paschim Teghori, Rejinagar)

As I have mentioned, that there is no sharp division between faiths, and in everyday life, there was barely any trouble during the Urs festivals in 2018. I could interview some of the close friends of the local committee for mosques. They were actively participating in the Urs celebration and were happily having Khichdi – the staple food prepared to feed the entire village on that day. As my ethnography on the violence will reveal shortly, it is this openness within the different varieties of Islamic practices that came under attack since 2010. What happened in 2010 has completely transformed the nature of Islamic identity and their interface with local Hindus in Rejinagar.

The narratives of violence

Local villagers recall 2010 as one of the key moments of the fundamentalists' attack on the syncretic traditions which slowly but surely transformed the intra-Muslim and Hindu-Muslim relationship dynamics of the region. One of the villagers Md. Soidul Islam in a Group Discussion held in 2018 mentioned that there was an organised move from the Shariyati people, especially those attached to the local mosques to capture the properties belonging to the local Mazars. "There was enough funding available to build up new Mosques and a group of Imams, local leaders belonging to TMC wanted to convert Khanka Sharifs either into Mosques or into Eidgah."

In July 2010, the followers of Hajrat Khwaja Jainal Abedin-al Chisti's Dargah were preparing for the celebration of Urs in the village Najirpur. This Dargah belongs to the *Chistia tariqa*, where music, especially the performance of traditional qawwali song and dance, is an essential and integral part of prayer and devotion. For the celebration of Urs, Golam Mostafa, the present *Halem* of the Dargah, invited their religious leader – they call the *hujur*. "This was an auspicious event for us. We created a platform and decked it with flower where we wanted our hujur to take rest and address the crowd. We also arranged for a band party and in the evening we wanted to hold a qawwali function. A few days before Urs, local Mosque declared that our activities are not only anti-Islamic, but also a threat to Islamic cultural heritage." Consequently, local mosques declared an oral fatwa asking people a) not to participate in the event, b) not to organise any music and dance programme, c) not to organise any rally and d) not go beyond the nearest crossing. Such issuance of *fatwa* was first of its kind and the followers of Dargah didn't pay much attention to it. On the day as the

celebration progressed and the band party started playing music in the tune of a popular Qawwali, a couple of local mosques used their loudspeakers and asked people to follow the instructions. They have reminded that at first they should comply with the mosques as they are Muslims and that there is one God – Allah. Immediately, the mosque committee members and their followers came out in large numbers with bamboo sticks, large pieces of bricks and started to beat up the Dargah followers. “Most of the common people fled immediately. Hindus, who came to see our *Hujur* were terrorised, they were directly threatened and warned that if they ever come back they will have to face consequences . . . me, a handful of other followers and my aged father were dragged towards the Mosque” – as narrated by Chand Muhammad, Golam Mostafa’s elder son in 2017. I met Golam Mostafa and learned what happened to them inside the mosque. Golam *Chacha* is about 76 and has numerous health-related issues. In 2017, he could barely stand on his feet and say a few words as he constantly suffers from breathing problem. “I never expected that they will drag me like an animal and beat me up with sandals in front of all others, and everyone will remain a mere spectator. They did it in front of people who respect me as a haleem of the mazar. They alleged that I earn money out of halemdari (i.e., as caretaker of the Mazar) and that I am no longer a Muslim. I was bleeding, could barely listen to what they were saying, but I was later told that I was excommunicated from the village and of my Islamic identity. They asked me to chant the six Kalimas to establish our faithfulness on Allah.” Chand and others added as the age-old Chacha was breathing heavily “we have never said that we don’t believe in Allah, nor did we ignore anything prescribed by the Mosque, but this was insulting . . . this was unthinkable, even today our followers are afraid of revealing their affiliation with our mazar. They perform five times Namaaz and accept all fatwas. Because (added by another person) if we don’t do that we will be targeted and declared as non Muslim, Kafer.”

The Dargah was damaged in 2010 (Figure 4.1). They simply hurled stones and brick pieces on the tiled thatching until it was completely shattered. Later they used shovel to break down the doors and windows of the building.

On a winter evening in 2019 while returning from the village, I asked Chand Muhammad about the reasons for which they have failed to organise a strong protest and save or rebuild the Dargah. Chand’s reply was quite revealing. He argued that it is the very nature of tolerance of the Chistia tradition that stops them from launching even a counter protest. They could never rebuild the construction and the tradition of Hajrat Khwaja Jainal Abedin-al Chisti is slowly disappearing under the dominant Sharia practices. Another reason, according to Chand, is the absence of administrative support to sustain this localised practice. “They (the Shariyatis) have with them a strong political support from the ruling TMC and hence, administrative machinery acts for them. Police simply refused to take the FIR and told



Figure 4.1 The present condition of Hajrat Khwaja Jainal Abedin-al Chisti's Dargah. Note the tiled thatching is destroyed, and windows are removed. This photograph was taken after a group discussion on the open ground where Urs was planned to be celebrated in 2010. Note among the people none of them bear any prominent Islamic identity markers like beard and fez cap

Source: photograph taken by the author in 2018

us to solve it internally. They didn't see any difference between these variations within the Islamic traditions."

The 2010 incident was a one-sided attack where the Pirpanthi people couldn't put up much of a resistance against the Shariyatis. In my repeated interaction with the followers, I could see that apart from people like Chand Muhammad and a few others, the rest of the followers do not want to undertake any sustained effort to rebuild the Dargah. It is difficult to ascertain if the attack was just a symbolic end to an already diminishing small-scale folk Islamic tradition facing the dominant Shariyat followers, which is well organised and well connected. The tradition of such conflict continued at a low pace until 2016 when another large-scale violence took place. In 2016, three more incidents of similar nature happened in the same area. Again the conflict took place during the celebration of Urs. This time the followers of Qadiriyya tariqa gathered for Urs on October 29, 2016. In a

discussion the *Khalifa* of the Dargah, Nur Ahmed Seikh was discussing the Islamic concept of *Jannat* – the heaven. During his talk, he implied that it is the deed that decided if a person is entitled to go to heaven. Answering a question Nur Ahmed said that people like Rabindranath Tagore, Mother Teresa will definitely go to heaven. As he continued the discussion along the same line a few people from the mosque committee went to his Dargah. “I was asked that how could I say that non Muslims can reach Jannat? I was angry and said ‘are you the gatekeeper of heaven? Who are you to decide who will go to heaven and who will not? Mother Teresa did a lot of good things for poor and downtrodden. She is definitely go the heaven.’ . . . they paid no attention and asked me to go and have a debate with the Imam of local Masjid. I agreed but never expected that people will beat me up like they did with Golam Mostafa” [recorded in July 2017].

Nur Ahmed was taken to the mosque and a debate initiated where the Imam, his followers and Mosque committee drove off Nur Ahmed’s followers and cornered him inside the mosque. They used the mosque microphone to declare him as anti-Islam and Kafer and later beat him up with leather sandal as they did with Golam Mostafa. I still remember when I first met him, he was yet to come out from the shock and humiliation. He sobbed and cried. Understandably, it was more of a public shame and humiliation rather than the physical pain which he had to go through. As they continued to torture Nur Ahmed inside the mosque, the Masjid committee along with local TMC cadres launched an organised attack on his Khanqua Sharif. It has a concrete construction, hence they brought shovel and sledgehammer. The roof was damaged and three unfinished concrete pillars were also destroyed (Figure 4.2).

The attackers shouted at the villagers and threatened that such anti-Islamic practices will no longer be tolerated in the village. All along they kept sloganeering *Allah-ho-Akbar*, *Nara-e-Takbeer* which popularly perceived as aggressive Islamic slogans stating Allah is the greatest. They didn’t stop there. Another Khanqa Sharif belonging to Chistia tariqa was adjacent to it. The Dargah was built on a bamboo structure and had a straw thatching. They completely destroyed it. I could only see only the remaining part of the bamboo structure (Figure 4.3).

The first resistance to such a frenzy crowd came from the village Paschim Teghori. After destroying the second Khanqa Sharif, they moved towards the third one at Paschim Teghori. “We were prepared with our group. We knew that they needed a strong resistance and as they came towards our area we started hurling stones. We had bamboo sticks ready and we decided that we are not going to tolerate this nonsense any more” – told by Abdul Mannan, a 52-year-old Pirpanthi from Paschim Teghori. The pretext of this preparedness was another fatwa by the local mosque. As the father of Jaher Seikh, a Pirpanthi who died on April 3, 2017, the local mosque declared a fatwa. The Imam of the mosque asked the entire village not to organise



Figure 4.2 The partially destroyed Khanqa Sharif belonging to Qadiriyya tariqa

Source: photograph taken by the author in 2017

the janaza and boycott anyone participating in it. Jaher Seikh lodged police complaint at Rejinagar Police Station (Diary No. 110, date: 03.04.2017). Later with the organised move of the Pirpanthi people in the village, Jaher could perform the last rites for his father. This fatwa was not sanctioned by the villagers, especially the Pirpanthis at large. Because of the organised move by them, the Shariyati people had to abandon their plan of destroying other Khanqa Sharifs of the village.

The police complaint against the fatwa was perhaps an initiation of the first resistance against the Shariya encroachment in the village. As they could stop the Shariya followers and powerful local leaders, they began to realise the importance of being organised and reach out to organisations of a similar kind. “We went to lodge a police complaint and police refused to take one. For them we are only 5% or even less than that and therefore we should be able to accept the majoritarian sentiment. We should be able to resolve this conflict internally” – as told by Hasan Ali Mollah in July 2017. I wanted to know the police and administrative perception of the issue and as expected I find a complete lack of awareness of the differences within the Islam. Apart from the local Panchayat members, the rest of the



Figure 4.3 The completely destroyed Khanqa Sharif in Rejinagar

Source: photograph taken by the author in 2017

administrative officers or police personnel refused to acknowledge that there are variations within Islamic practices. Hence, at best they perceived it as an internal conflict. Moreover, the mosque-based organisations are closely networked with the ruling TMC. One of the police personnels revealed on account of anonymity

The problem is quite old and smaller everyday conflicts remain unreported. We are not in a position to intervene into the sensitive religious issues without involving the local political players. If anything goes wrong and situation goes out of our control it could spread rapidly and we will have to face consequences. Those who are numerically weak need to adjust a little more.

(told in August 2017)

Akbar Ali Sekh, with his life-long experience of resisting the religious fundamentalists, argues that earlier the Shariya followers, especially the mosque committees, used to target and attack Bauls and Fakirs, primarily because

they are different and do not conform to any norms. They practice a lifestyle that fundamentalists from both religions cannot approve. Pirpanthi people on the other hand are no rebels. “They have deep respect for holy Quran, they perform each and every Islamic ritual, yet they are relatively open. They can intermix easily with the Hindus, can say with open mind that non Muslims can earn their entitlement to heaven. We find them as *Bartamanpanthi* (Pragmatic – loosely meant). After Baul and Fakir now they are also targeted not only because of their faith or practices but also to capture their space in the society and their physical space within the village. They are slowly encroaching the land of each of the Khanqa sharif or Mazar.”

In August 2017 after a constant effort of Baul-Fakir Sangha – an organisation protecting the rights of Baul and Fakir, local police finally sent an officer to enquire the situation. Hafez Nur Alam, one of the active Shariyati followers and a member of the local mosque committee, met him and took him inside the mosque and locked him up.

I got the news from him directly. I had his number and I called him up. He confirmed that he was being locked up inside a Mosque. I immediately called up Shaktinath Jha,² the president of Baul-Fakir Sangha, and requested him to intervene. He called up Rejinagar Police Station, it appeared that the Officer-in-Charge of the station was one of his students and he couldn't really force his ex-student to take on the political and religious forces alone.

(as told by Moinul Ali Laskar, in September 2018)

I had a chance to meet Shaktinath Jha in Kolkata where he said that he communicated the entire issue to APDR.³ Very recently in a magazine named *Bodhoday*, APDR has published an article based on what Baul-Fakir Sangha has reported. The Sangha has taken up the issue of attack on Pirpanthi followers at their 34th Annual Conference which was held in Beldanga, Murshidabad. For Shaktinath Jha and the secretary, Akbar Ali Sekh, mobilising police and local administration through writing letters, etc., will not be effective unless a large section of the people perceives this as a problem that requires attention.

In order to understand the local-level power dynamics revolving around the consolidation of Islamic identity, I began to explore the mosque committee and their network with local politics. The Rejinagar area has been a traditional Congress stronghold. Since 2011, there has been an increase in TMC support base. According to an elected Panchayat member, since 2012, TMC has begun to penetrate within the Muslim society by tapping the mosques and its committees.⁴ “It was relatively easy for the TMC to penetrate within the Mosque committees especially after the state showed *real* intention to pay for the Imams and Muezzins. Since 2012 we could see such direct involvement of local mosques and party.” The Panchayat member is

a Muslim and reacted when another research participant tried to say that the practices in Mazar are not sanctioned in the Islamic tradition. “What does Hafez do in the Anchal Samiti office? Why did he use his connections to stop the investigation on the destruction of the Khanqa Sharifs in the village? Don’t we go there? Don’t we remember the celebrations for over decades?” – was what he said in response. It clearly reflected the fact that these traditions do have a position in the entire society, but mosques along with political-administrative support have successfully alienated them.

Although, in that Group Discussion, no further argument was generated and people listened to the Panchayat member patiently, one of the villagers said rather bluntly, “No matter what he says, people will prioritise Mosque over Khanqa Sharif.” As I had an opportunity to see the transformation of the nature of religious practices within the village since 2017, I could find out there are several reasons for which the mosque has successfully been able to replace other localised and diversified forms and practices. First, mosque is the most conspicuous space for Islamic practice and it is well organised in maintaining its everyday regulations ritualistically. Second, there is a strong nexus between the mosque and local politics. Earlier Congress used to involve key players like Maulana, Imam in different decisions, but they were never directly part of the party machinery. The division between politics and religion is now sufficiently blurred. In a sense as I could make out even during the Congress rule, people used to see the party as an alternative space to go and seek justice. With TMC’s intrusion, both party and mosque have become synonymous. This synonymy carries a considerable normative power to influence everyday life and thought process of an average Muslim. Third, the sudden rise in the number and extravagance of the mosques have made them appear as the sole space of affluence within an otherwise poverty-stricken village. Finally, the well-organised, all-encompassing and penetrating mosques have become the only place to give “protection” to the “vulnerable” Muslims.

Urs in 2018 portrayed a large-scale participation of villagers in the celebration (Figure 4.4). No negotiation with mosque took place, yet the mosques didn’t declare any fatwa in 2017 or in 2018. To be on the safe side, the Chistia Tariqa didn’t arrange for qawwali. A loudspeaker was arranged but used only for important announcements.

The meta-narrative of Islamic fundamentalism in Bengal

My ethnographic experience in Rejinagar represents a micro-narrative of how dominant Shariya tradition is engulfing the folk and Sufi varieties of Islamic practices. It shows a conscious attempt of creating “ideal Muslim” prototype and punishing those who do not conform to it. Participation of neighbouring Hindus in the Dargahs and Khanqa Sharifs indicates the relatively open and syncretic nature of such traditions. Attack on these traditions



Figure 4.4 A moment from the Urs celebration in 2018

Source: photograph taken by the Faruq-el-Islam, AAMRA ek Sachetan Prayas Forum

clearly shows an attempt to override the syncretism and occupy places where co-habitation could breed and grow. “Jamaat” is the term that one most frequently encounters in Bengal (including Bangladesh).⁵ I recall one of the villagers, a bank employee from Baduria where a riot took place in 2017 (see Chapter 6), praised the Jamaat because they ask people to do Namaaz and follow the religion. The process is perhaps much older than 2017 as Dasgupta (2009) noted that the secular nature of Muslims who preferred Congress and LF over the Islamic fundamentalists has started to change. The change he found was primarily connected with community mobilisation and emergence of Hindu Nationalists in villages of the state. TMC had an alliance with BJP in 1998 and 2003. If one gives a glance on the other side of the border, Bangladesh, one sees that in 2011, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came to power having a coalition with Jamaat along with other Islamist parties. This is also the time when Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) expanded its support base by using Ahle Hadith Madrasas and Mosque network and the Jamaat student wing, Shibir. The growth of JMB had its ultimate showdown on August 17, 2005, as within an hour 500 small bombs were exploded in 63 out of Bangladesh’s 64 districts killing two and injuring about a hundred people. There were leaflets distributed which carried a warning, asking the government of Bangladesh to install the “rule of Allah” and then only they will co-operate (Riaz, 2008). The 2013 Shahbag protests demanding the death penalty to Abdul Quader Molla and

ban on Jamaat had got support from the ruling Awami League, but eventually, it earned the anti-Islamic tag. The day after Abdul Quader Molla was executed, Bangladeshi minority Hindus at several places experienced an attack by the Islamic fundamentalists (Mallet, 2014). The Shahbag protest intensified with *muktomona* (liberal thinking) bloggers, students and other activists asking for the restoration of a secular Bangladesh. 2013–2016 has also seen the brutal murder of bloggers who spearheaded protests and stripped the Islamic fundamentalists. A newspaper *Aamar Desh* run by a BNP advisor published personal details of bloggers, academicians and secularists “who had committed ‘contempt of religion’ . . . [which] seemingly encouraged a spate of killings that would come to scar Bangladesh (Allchin, 2019, p. 32). The ultimate fate of the Shahbag movement was decided when Awami League too arguably submitted towards the Islamic fundamentalists by setting up a nine-member panel to check comments on Islam and Prophet Muhammad (Bdnews, 2013).

The attack on Minority Hindus in Bangladesh during the execution of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, the top ideologue of Jamaat-e-Islami and Abdul Quader Molla is portrayed promptly as the state of condition of “Hindu brothers and sisters” in an Islamic country by the BJP. It was relatively easy for the BJP to penetrate the collective conscience especially among the refugees of West Bengal who had to migrate from the then East Pakistan and settle down here. As argued by Professor Abul Barkat, 632 Hindus on average have left Bangladesh every day since 1964–2013 which is about 11.3 million migrants. The prime reasons as he argued have been religious persecution and discrimination (India Today, 2016a; Bhattacharya, 2020c). This was contrasted with TMC’s appeasement of Muslims in Bengal through policies and practices.⁶ TMC and LF remained silent and witnessed 16 different Islamic groups rallying in Kolkata in support of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi and speaking against the liberal Shahbag movement in Bangladesh (Ganguly, 2013). Deb (2013) along a similar line went further to brand TMC’s politics as the politics with Muslim “vote bank.” He even tags TMC’s Nandigram movement along this line.

Agitation at Nandigram against land acquisition, which Banerjee spearheaded, was actually about getting the Muslim vote; Nandigram is a Muslim-majority area, and no one really knows how many of them are indigenous and how many are Bangladeshi migrants who became Indian citizens through voter cards doled out by the Left Front. Banerjee wants to keep that bank with her, and the Left wants to get it back. So, silence is the best policy in the matter of a convicted Islamist fundamentalist war criminal. Meanwhile, in the month following Sayeedi’s sentencing, Jamaat supporters in Bangladesh have attacked more than 300 Hindu temples, homes and shops. Silence is the best policy there too.

Articles such as these are reproduced in several pro-Hindutva websites and circulated widely using the BJP IT cell to establish a strong sentiment against the Islamic fundamentalists which indeed was growing rapidly through rather “unknown” processes as what happened in Rejinagar or Malda as we will discuss shortly.

The organised Islamic move in Kaliachak, Malda

The manifestation of Islamic organisations and their violent nature in recent was first felt in Kaliachak Police Station in Malda district. Malda is another district with Muslim majority (51.27%, as per 2011 Census)⁷ having close proximity with neighbouring Bangladesh on the eastern side and Jharkhand on the west. When neighbouring Bangladesh was experiencing a rise of fundamentalist forces, it had a considerable impact in places like Malda (AAMRA and CSSS, 2016). On January 3, 2016, news spread mostly through social media that Kaliachak Police Station was under attack by the Muslims. A leaflet was distributed for weeks on behalf of Hindu Jagran Manch – an affiliating pro-Hindutva organisation of RSS at many places which claimed that Malda has seen the beginning of West Bangladesh. It heavily criticised the role of TMC and present the Kaliachak incident as an attempt by Jihadi groups to destroy evidence from the police station. It used the hyper-nationalism by mentioning the role of the Indian Army and TMC government in contrast. Furthermore, the leaflet claimed that the Muslim Jihadi first destroyed the police station, burned down several vehicles and then attacked neighbouring Hindu villages. The leaflet ends with a request to the Hindu people to wake up and save their state from becoming West Bangladesh. Mainstream media never reported Kaliachak incident nor did they do any of the subsequent riots because of the fear and the government restrictions that such news has the potential to spread further violence. With the absence of mainstream media reports, people easily fell into the trap of Islamophobic posts circulated by leaflets and via social media.

The fieldwork in Kaliachak violence reveals that the incident was not a communal one, in the sense we understand communalism as primarily a Hindu–Muslim conflict, but it was a different kind of fundamentalism. The violence was an outcome of a mix of outrage against Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha leader Kamlesh Tiwari for his derogatory remarks against Prophet Mohammed, which he made on January 1 (Ali, 2016) and a competition between two rival Islamic groups. My aim was primarily to enquire what actually happened on that day. Through my ethnographic enquiry, it became clear that a well-established Islamic organisation Anjuman Ahle Sunnatul Jamaat (AASJ) is actively involved in Purifying Islam following the Deobandi, Wahabi⁸ tradition. Their conservatism can be seen as patriarchal, religious and puritarian in nature. However, such conservatism through mosques and madrasas has a certain degree of acceptability

among the middle-class Muslims in Malda. I have met and talked to several Muslims who actively support AASJ.

This is an organisation which binds us together. There is nothing wrong in practicing one's own religion. Our leaders never tell us to hate others, but have always told us to cohabit with everyone. Asking people to do Namaaz in my opinion is good. Veil- Burqa is part of our culture. I know people who are AASJ and also go to Furfura Sharif and worship graves . . . our leaders ask us to avoid them, but the organisation never forces us.

– as told by an AASJ member in June 2016

Mosque committees and Imams are strict followers of Deobandi tradition and have relatively closer proximity with both the local politics and the administration. One of the local Muslims in a group discussion noted, “Most of the economically well-off people are followers of Deobandi and AASJ traditions while a vast majority has a lot of faith on Sufi centres.” A relatively new organisation, Idara-e-Shariya (IeS) is relatively more inclusive. The organisation follows Barelvi tradition and allows worship of Sufi Mazars. IeS with its relative openness attempted to reach out to the local people since 2014. A leaflet distributed by IeS strongly criticised Kamlesh Tiwari and requested all the “Nabi lovers” to join a protest rally in Kaliachak. AASJ, seeing the relevance of this programme, extended support to the rally.

Accordingly, on January 3, thousands of Muslims mobilised by IeS and AASJ gathered near the Kaliachak Police Station. “Most of them came from outside Kaliachak town. In the town Idara-e-Shariya doesn't have much of a support. They are in a process of gaining support from the Bihari settlers who speak a mix of Bengali and Bihari language. We could see them coming with their families and we never expected that this movement will turn out to be a violent one” as told by one of the AASJ followers in a group discussion in April 2016. The presence of women and children in the rally is one of the significant indicators that the protesters were not prepared to go violent. One of the Hindu settlers near the police station who has seen the entire incident from his house claimed that they were sloganeering “hang Tiwari,” “Narendra Modi give us answer,” *Allah-ho-Akbar*, *Nara-e-Takbeer* – the usual Islamic ones meaning Allah is great, and that there is one God, Allah.

An IeS, local member reported in December 2016 that the demonstration was going on peacefully. They were told that IeS will hold the demonstration till 12:00 pm and then will start their journey back home. IeS chief leadership had contacted some of the media to get a coverage of their protest. However, around 9:00 am, several AASJ followers came and there was some internal conflict between the two groups representing two different classes of Muslims. During my ethnographic engagements, I could see

a clear division exists between the AASJ followers who are mostly Bengali-speaking middle-class Muslims and IeS who are mixed language (Khotta language – as locally termed)-speaking Bihari settlers.

We feel there is a tension mounting for quite a few years now to prove who is more Islamic?, Idara or the Jamaati followers. The conflict started when the Jamaati followers challenged openly within the meeting about the extent of our purity in practicing Islam. And then suddenly a group of armed men with petrol bombs, country made pistol and strong bamboo sticks came and immediately broke the main entrance of the police station . . . the situation went out of control and they started torching the unclaimed vehicles being disposed off near the Police Station because of pending court cases or accident damages. We have heard that they have also attacked Mr. Ram Saha who was then in charge of the police station . . . they looted the office, vandalised and set ablaze the documents and files inside the police station.

(As stated by some of the eye-witnesses in
a group discussion in June 2016)

It was difficult for me to understand how the outsiders could come and vandalise a police station without having local support. Over the years, a few names were repeated by several people in different group discussions. Assadullah Biswas was one of the most prominent names I encountered. Allegedly he was an opportunist who used the opportunity of this gathering to vandalise the police station and destroyed several “evidences” inside the police station that could prove his misdeed. In April 2017, he was arrested by police and then handed over to National Investigation Agency on serious charges such as counterfeiting currency, abducting, rioting and murder (Anandabazar Patrika, 2017; The Hindu, 2020).

As Hindu Jagaran Mancha attempted to make Kaliachak violence a communal one (see Figure 4.5), I tried to learn the extent to which this violence affected the neighbouring Hindu community. The main approach road to Kaliachak Police Station has two temples, both of which are actually entrances to a couple of Hindu villages. The villagers recall the day of violence but on several occasions mentioned that the rally never targeted the Hindu villages. Both the temples have remained untouched. Similarly, just behind the police station, there is another Hindu settlement. No one from the rally entered the Hindu village periphery. However, a temple inside the police station premises was vandalised and the local priest reported that some of the utensils have gone missing. “The idol remained intact, but they took some cash which was there inside the donation box. Police couldn’t do anything because they outnumbered them” – as told by the priest, Pratap Tiwari, in July 2016.⁹ AAMRA and CSSS (2016) in their fact-finding report

মালদাতে সূচনা হয়েছে “পশ্চিম বাংলাদেশের”

গত ৩রা জানুয়ারী মালদার কালিয়াচকে একদল মুসলমান জেহাদী থানা আক্রমণ করে, থানার সব ফাইল নষ্ট করে, মালখানা থেকে রাইফেল লুণ্ঠ করে, তারপর থানাটাই জ্বালিয়ে দেয়। পুলিশের গাড়ি, বি.এস. এফ-এর জিপ, সাধারণ মানুষের গাড়ি সহ মোট ১২টি বাহন জ্বালিয়ে দেয়। থানার পুলিশ, কোনমতে প্রাণ নিয়ে পালায়। থানা পুড়িয়ে ওই উন্মত্ত জনতা ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়ে পার্শ্ববর্তী হিন্দু গ্রাম বালিয়াপাড়াতে। নির্বিচারে লুণ্ঠ করে গ্রামগুলিকে, চলে বোমাবাজি ও গুলি। গুলিতে আহত হয়ে হাসপাতালে মৃত্যুর সঙ্গে পাঞ্জা লড়ছেন দুই নিরাপরাধ গ্রামবাসী।

কালিয়াগঞ্জ বাংলাদেশের সীমান্তে একটি ব্লক। জাল টাকা, আফিম, চোরচালানোর স্বর্গরাজ্য। এই মাফিয়া রাজের বর্তমান বাদশা শাসক দলের নেতা বকুল শেখ। ৩ তারিখে থানা লুণ্ঠের নেতৃত্ব দেন আর এক শাসক দলের নেতা অসাদুল্লা বিশ্বাস। এই ঘটনায় পুড়ে ছাই হয়ে গেল এদের দুর্ভর্মে সব নথি। বাংলাদেশের সীমান্তে এই বিস্তীর্ণ অঞ্চল পুড়ে রইল অরক্ষিত। আরও কতশত দেশদ্রোহী জঙ্গী সেই সুযোগে ঢুকে পড়ল তার ঠিক নেই। যখন পাঠানকোটে পাক জঙ্গীদের গুলিতে মারা যাচ্ছে ভারতীয় সেনা, ঠিক তখন পশ্চিমবঙ্গে শুরু হল রাষ্ট্রের বিরুদ্ধে অভ্যুত্থান।

এতে এ রাজ্যে কারও মাথা ব্যথা নেই। সেটা অবশ্য স্বাভাবিক। রাজ্যের মুখ্যমন্ত্রী ক্ষমতায় এসেই ১০৫০০ খারিজি মাদ্রাসার অনুমোদন দিয়েছিলেন। সেখানেই জন্ম নিয়েছে সিমুলিয়া মাদ্রাসা। খাগড়াগড়ে শাসক দলের পার্টি অফিসের উপরেই গড়ে উঠেছিল মারাত্মক বিস্ফোরক তৈরীর জেহাদী কার্খানা। গার্ডেনরীতে শাসক দলের শ্রমিক নেতা আর তার পুত্র ছাত্রনেতা ধরা পড়েছে পাকিস্তানের চর হিসাবে। এসবে ক্ষমতাশীন দলের ক্রক্ষেপ নেই। তারা ইমাম ভাতা, মোয়াজ্জেম ভাতা, পাক গজল গায়কের সম্বর্ধনাতে ব্যস্ত। মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর অকপট স্বীকারোক্তি “আপনাদের জন্যই আমি ক্ষমতায় এসেছি। বর্তমানে ওই ভোটব্যাঙ্ক যেন অটুট থাকে। আর সংখ্যাগুরু হিন্দু ছাগলের দল একটু কাঁঠাল পাতা দেখলেই লেজ নাড়তে নাড়তে ভোট দেবে।”

একটিও কথা নেই আনন্দবাজার ইত্যাদি কাগজের পাতায়। কেন? না, বিষয়টা

Figure 4.5 Leaflet distributed by Hindu Jagran Manch

Source: authors' own collection with the help of AAMRA

স্পর্শকাতর। দাদরি স্পর্শকাতর নয়, গুজরাহের দাদা ও নয়। সেসব নিয়ে পাতার পর পাতা লেখা যায়, ছবি ছাপা যায়, শুধু হিন্দু আক্রান্ত হলে সেটাই স্পর্শকাতর নয়, বাংলাদেশ, দেগঙ্গা, নলিয়াখালি, জুরানপুর যেখানেই মুসলমানের হাতে নিরীহ হিন্দু খুন হয়েছে, মা বোন ধর্ষিতা হয়েছেন সেইসব স্পর্শকাতর। আনন্দবাজারের পাঠক জানতেই পারবে না এই নির্মম নৃশংসতার কথা। বাংলার শেষ হিন্দুটির শ্মশানযাত্রার আগে এইসব বাজারী কাগজ মুখ খুলবে না।

আর সেই সব বুদ্ধিজীবী, কবি, শিল্পীরা যারা এই সেদিনও দাদরির জন্য প্রাণত্যাগ করছিলেন তাঁরা যে কোন ইদুরের গর্তে ঢুকে গেছেন তা খুঁজেও পাওয়া যাবে না। জুরানপুরের গরীব তপশিলী হিন্দুরা নিহত হওয়ার ঘটনা সাম্প্রদায়িকতা নয়, মালদার কালিয়াচকের ঘটনা অসহিষ্ণুতা নয়। কত স্বার্থপর, ধান্দাবাজ, কাপুরুষ ওইসব তথাকথিত বুদ্ধিজীবীরা।

আই এস আই এস এই সপ্তাহেই বলেছে, ভারতবর্ষ দখল করাটা কেবল সময়ের অপেক্ষা। কালিয়াচক হয়ত তারই “অ্যাসিড টেস্ট”। কারণ এ রাজ্য দেশের মধ্যে সবচেয়ে ‘সফট টার্গেট’। এত নিলজ্বর রাজনীতি, এত ধান্দাবাজ সংবাদমাধ্যম আর এত কাপুরুষ বুদ্ধিজীবী ভারতে আর কোথাও নেই।

বাংলাদেশে হিন্দুরা জেহাদীদের প্রতিদিনের শিকার। মায়ের সামনে মেয়ে মায়ের সামনে মা অহরহ ধর্ষিতা হচ্ছেন। বুক ফুলিয়ে ঘুরে বেড়াচ্ছে অপরাধীরা। হিন্দুর সম্পত্তি দখল হচ্ছে, দিবালাকে সম্পূর্ণ পরিবারকে হত্যা করা হচ্ছে। কোন বিচার নেই। মালদার ঘটনা প্রমাণ করল এপার বাংলাতেও সেইদিন আসতে আর দেরী নেই।

আজ আপনি কি করবেন বন্ধু? পশ্চিমবঙ্গে চোখের সামনে “পশ্চিম বাংলাদেশ” হওয়ার জন্য অপেক্ষা করবেন? নাকি, ওইসব রাজনীতির ব্যবসায়ীদের প্রকাশ্যে প্রশ্ন করবেন, ক্ষত্রস্বার্থে কেন বাগডাগড় থেকে গার্ডেনরিচ তৈরী করছেন এই রাজ্যে? সহস্র হাত মুষ্টিবদ্ধ করে বলুন, খবরের কাগজের মালিক, সাংবাদিক বন্ধ কর এই নিলজ্বর নোরোমি। ওইসব তথাকথিত বুদ্ধিজীবীদের মুখোশ খুলে দিয়ে দিনের আলোতে দাঁড় করিয়ে বলুন, দোহাই আপনাদের বাংলাকে আর কলুষিত করবেন না। আমরা বুকের রক্ত দিয়ে শপথ নিয়েছি, পশ্চিমবঙ্গকে কিছুতেই ‘পশ্চিম বাংলাদেশ’ হতে দেব না।

সূত্র: হিন্দু জাগরণ মঞ্চ, দক্ষিণ বঙ্গ, ১০/২, বিধান সভা, কলকাতা-৬
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Figure 4.5 (Continued)

wrote that some Hindu people have suffered a few damages like a scooty belonging to a Hindu family was set ablaze. These are to be seen as chance damage. The report speaks about stone hurling towards 20–30 Hindu households adjacent to the police station, or a small shop owned by a Hindu was burned down by a group of goons. Their owners argue that these are collateral damage. A serious fight was about to take place as the attackers tried to take out bamboo sticks used as fence to a temple located nearby and a group of Hindu boys tried to stop them. There was an allegation of a bullet injury of a Hindu boy. This claim was rejected by the local administration and I could not find any police report of the same. It was beyond the purview of the present work to understand the complex nexus between the local goons and “mafia” with Islamic organisations and local politics. However, there were enough reflections indicative of a local nexus between the organisations and cross-border smuggling business. The increasing consolidation of Islamic fundamentalism through organisations like IeS and AASJ is symptomatic to the fact that a) in the recent past, Muslims have felt, or are made to feel the importance of being organised indicative of their insecurity and b) in the recent past, organisations have become the stronger and secular fabric of the state has begun to change drastically.

Comparing Kaliachak with other similar violence in West Bengal, Nath and Roy Chowdhury (2019b, p. 56) note, “Kaliachak violence made the stereotype of Muslim terror an ‘established fact’ in common perception in West Bengal. With wide media attention Kaliachak became a household name to represent Muslim atrocities on Hindus. It was one of the first incidents that made Hindu-Muslim discourse back to the discursive sphere of West Bengal. Because of television footage and Muslim majority in Maldah district of West Bengal, the attack was seen as an outcome of communal violence and a fight between Hindus and Muslims.” The entire BJP IT cell machinery worked relentlessly to make Kaliachak violence a Hindu–Muslim issue. Consequently, Kaliachak was the most frequently used reference point in everyday discourse to show the effect of TMC’s alleged Muslim appeasing policies. As we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, this construct kept growing with each of the communal conflicts that West Bengal kept experiencing in the coming years.

While the IT cell-based spread of misinformation successfully created a singular narrative like Hindus are in danger (*Hindu khatre mein hain*), much-needed attention to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and Islamophobia appeared bewildering. Bhattacharya and Sinha’s (2017) short report in *Hindustan Times* appears to be the only mainstream media that reports that “The Kaliachak incident got portrayed, even beyond the borders of Malda, as a ‘communal riot’. Where did that version of events come from? [They question] Primarily the small but highly effective social media cells of the saffron brigade.”

Muslim identity consolidation seems to have been undergoing some rapid and robust organisational changes. These are not restricted to the activities of mosques and cultural expressions such as Namaaz prayers. People's everyday cultural expressions and practices are deliberately structured to form a monolith. This is a slow process of using the power of cultural forces to a) unify a large section of the population by a complex mix of threat, insecurity and a sense of belonging, b) create ideal Muslim prototype and erase and silence the existing variations and c) destroy, occupy the slightest possibilities of syncretism by converting Mazars into Shariya practices and excluding the others (especially the Hindus). The puritarian trend among the Islamic organisations, cross-border reach of Islamic fundamentalism, their co-ordination with the local and regional politics and finally ignorance among the major political and administrative players indicate two possibilities. First, the less plausible one is the fact that there is a problem of perception regarding the potential of real-life co-habitation of different faiths within and outside Islam. Mainstream political parties are either ignorant of the fact that there exists a huge difference between the Sufi, Mazar, Pirpanthi tradition and Shariya tradition of Islam. Second, and more likely is the clientelistic probability that indicates political parties are building networks with forces that are more organised and can exert stronger control over the electorate. Hence, TMC uses Islamic symbols in political practices, adopts allegedly Muslim-appeasing policies and in organising practices continues to share the dais with people having control through religious organisations including the most conspicuous one *Furfura sharif* and its connection with ASJ. The competitive expansion of organisations in Kaliachak therefore is indicating a potential rise of political Islam in the state and increasing shrinking of secular democratic space.

The rise of political Islam along the line Shariya ideology is coeval with the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, which is equally organised if not more. The Hindu fundamentalists show the percentage population of Muslims in Bengal and make it a point to promote that Hindus are in danger in the state. The next chapter gives an outline of the organisations and mechanisms by which the politico-religious ideology of Hindutva is creating a space as the secular democratic sentiments are shrinking in the state.

Notes

- 1 www.census2011.co.in/census/district/7-murshidabad.html.
- 2 Shaktinath Jha is a retired professor of Beldanga College, where he used to teach Bengali language and literature. Over the years, he has become the face of Baul-Fakir Sangha.
- 3 APDR is one of the frontline organisations working relentlessly to the protection of Human Rights in West Bengal. It has branches all over the state and has network throughout the country. Their url is apdrwb.in.
- 4 Quite in the same manner in which they have tapped the traditional tribal political system in places like Bankura (see, for example, Nath, 2018, 2020a).

- 5 See for more details on Bangladesh Allchin (2019).
- 6 As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 that the provision of allowance for Imams and Muezzins and the Hijab-clad appearance has been seen with scepticism. BJP along with its powerful IT cell promoted this to be symptoms of the making of an Islamic Bengal.
- 7 www.census2011.co.in/census/district/6-maldah.html.
- 8 During the first half of the nineteenth century, two Islamic reformist movement took place, the Faraizis and Wahabis. Both of them aimed at purifying Islam by wiping off non-Islamic practices. Consequently, they do not support worshipping of Sufi saints (see Rejinagar section for more details) (De, 1974).
- 9 It is, however, important to question the existence of a temple inside a police station of a secular country.

AGGRESSIVE HINDUTVA, ITS ORGANISATIONS AND MECHANISMS

On my fifth visit to Bhatpara, the municipality area in North 24 Parganas where politico-religious conflicts have been going on since the 2019 election, I asked about a Muslim area to a Hindi-speaking Hindu youth. I had the following conversation:

Youth: Darma lane? Whom do you want to meet at the Miyan (Muslim) bustee?

Me: No one, I just want to go there.

Youth: Why? No one is there? We have driven them out of their place. I, myself have driven them out with bombs. Next time we will push them so hard that they will never think of returning ever again.

Me: (taking a little risk) are you a BJP worker?

Youth: No, I was, but now I am with TMC. Working for BJP is no longer safe. Police lodges false cases and arrests us.

Me: are you still disgusted with the Miyan people?

Youth: Yes, my disgust is going to stay. Whether I am TMC or BJP, I am a Hindu first.

I was not shocked by this kind of reflection but was moved by the deeper connotation of this conversation. It was for the first time in my ethnographic engagement in Bhatpara that people openly spoke about their Muslim hatred and that too in front of a complete stranger. The youth is a Hindi-speaking third-generation settler whose forefathers moved from Uttar Pradesh in search of lucrative employment in the jute mills in Kankinara (more details in Chapter 6). A narrative of “Hindu first” is percolating in West Bengal for quite some time now, and it is not restricted to the Hindi-speaking people alone. Everyday discourses both in the real and in the virtual world revolve around the riots (Chapter 6) and Hindu–Muslim division. I have tried to unravel the major facets of the constructs such as “Hindu first,” “Hindus are in danger,” “West Bengal is becoming West Bangladesh/mini Pakistan” and so on. This chapter is a snapshot of my findings from different corners of the state. I have tried to tease out some of the major constructs, their

organisational backdrops and mechanisms of spread which has resulted in the formation and growth of Hindutva sentiments in West Bengal.

Grassroots organisations and their mechanisms

Over the years, I have encountered about 30 different organisations actively engaged in spreading Hindutva ideology in West Bengal. There are hundreds of different local unnamed *morchas*. They operate in the name of local temples or shrines. They are difficult to catch, but the presence of the RSS flag on different festive occasions is an indication of such associations. Table 5.1 is a list of major associations working in different socio-cultural spheres in West Bengal.

Each of these organisations is attached with their umbrella organisations like RSS and VHP. Apart from these, there are several other organisations including Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (students wing), Bangiya Shikshak o Shikshakarmi Sangha (high school teachers' association), Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad (lawyers' forum), etc., which are specialised wings to organise specialised workforces of the state. I have wilfully kept them aside, because here I am primarily dealing with organisations that are working at the socio-cultural front.

Table 5.1 List of different pro-Hindutva organisations, their nature of work and activity area in West Bengal

No.	Name	Nature of Work	Area
1	Bajrang Dal	Young men's wing of VHP. Gives physical fitness training to youths. Works actively to promote "sanatani" culture. Spreads hatred against Muslims and "western" practices like pre-marital love affairs, Valentines' day celebration, etc. Participates actively in different conflicts. Organises Ram Navami rally, and recitation of Hanuman Chalisa.	Mostly in industrial areas like Jute-mills of North 24 pgns and Hooghly, Asansol-Ranigunj. Spreading rapidly in other parts of the state
2	Durga Bahini/ Durga Shakti	Young women's wing of VHP. Physical training to women. Organises Ram Navami rally. Promotes Manu ideology. Spread hatred against Muslims and "Western" traditions.	Same
3	Hindu Jagaran Mancha	Spreads a fear that Hindus are in danger in West Bengal. Works for making Hindus conscious of their "existential crisis." Spread hatred against Muslims.	Throughout the state

(Continued)

Table 5.1 (Continued)

No.	Name	Nature of Work	Area
4	Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Vanabandhu Parishad	Attempts to accelerate the Hinduisation of tribal. Organises <i>ghar wapasi</i> – conversion to Hinduism among the tribal people. Involves in promoting education, healthcare among the tribal-dominated areas where state-led services are limited.	Mostly in the <i>Junglemahal</i> – the forested western part of the state including districts like Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Paschim Bardhaman
5	Bharatiya Kisan Sangh	Works among the farmers. Besides organising for their demands from the state, they are also involved in making people conscious of the importance of cow as mother.	Purba Bardhaman, Purba Medinipur
6	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh	The trade union of VHP. Involved in ensuring the rights of Hindu workers in different jute mills and other small industries.	Mostly active in the jute-mills
7	Bastuhara Sahayata Samiti	Wing for refugees. Promotes the importance of the National Register of Citizenship. Promotes a feeling that some of the reasons for their current problem are linked with the “Muslim appeasing” policy of the state.	Active in border areas
8	Vidya Bharati	Wing for education. Runs Saraswati schools where Hindutva is practiced parallel to regular education.	Active throughout the state
9	Sewa Bharati	Wing for social service. Dozens of NGOs are attached to it.	Active throughout the state
10	Rashtra Sevika Samiti	Women’s wing of RSS.	Active throughout the state
11	Arogya Bharati	Wing for organising all traditional medicine practitioners.	Active throughout the state

Invented traditions and hyperreal

Of late West Bengal has seen a proliferation of certain cultural traditions across the state. These cultural traditions work at different extents which can best be theorised as the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983). For Hobsbawm (1983, p. 2), “it [invented traditions] is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant.” It is “essentially a process of formalization, ritualization, characterised

by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 4). The rise in the number of Hanuman temples, playing Hanuman Chalisa in loudspeakers, carnivalesque Ram Navami rally and Ganga aarti at river Hooghly are all symptoms of such invented traditions.

The temple story:



Figure 5.1 A newly constructed Hanuman temple with permanent loudspeakers in Velaidihi village, Purulia

Source: photograph taken by the researcher

Temples such as the one in Figure 5.1 are to be found at regular intervals in districts like Purulia, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur where VHP-RSS-linked organisations like Vanabandhu Parishad and Hindu Jagaran Mancha are quite active. Similarly, if one avails the National Highway 41 which goes through the villages in Purba Medinipur, one can see on every bus stop there is one or more Hanuman idols kept either on the boulevard of the highway or at the village entrance. All these symbolic markings of the religious identity of a village or locale started in 2013–2014. Let me narrate my experience at the village Velaidihi in Purulia. This village located within the Joypur block has a mixed settlement. It has on its western border a large Muslim settlement and on the eastern border, there are Hindus. Tribal people like Santal and a few families of Munda also reside near the forested end of the village settlement. Vanabandhu Parishad regularly funds and organises different cultural programmes which are often held near the Hanuman temple. In the early morning, one can hear the Ramayana or Hanuman Chalisa is being played using the loudspeaker. One of the loudspeakers is positioned towards the Muslim settlement. Idris Ali, a Muslim villager in November 2020, reflected “The temple was constructed overnight by the Hindu Jagaran Mancha about two years back. Now they keep on playing one thing after another . . . I know even Hindus didn’t really like this particular thing. The organisers say if we [the Muslims] can play Aazan why can’t they. They fail to understand that our prayer is for a few minutes but they play Ramayana, Hanuman Chalisa for hours.” I could meet a few people belonging to the Hindu Jagaran Mancha and Vanabandhu Parishad together and their argument indeed followed what Idris said to me. They plan to organise a large-scale *Ghar Wapasi* programme among the tribal people so that they can formally “reconvert” to Hindu. One of the leaders explained “they are Hindus and they were always Hindus. Everyone live in India are Hindus.” Why then they need *Ghar Wapasi*? I asked. “To restart afresh a Hindu way of life . . . they were brainwashed by the Christian missionaries and converted into Christianity.” Correcting my “misconception,” they argued that the Santal deity of *Jaher than* is nothing but the worship of Lord Shiva. “Do they believe that *Jaher than* is Shiva?” – I asked. “Yes, we will help them realise that” replied one of the Vanabandhu Parishad workers.

The temple-based organisations’ use of loudspeakers is a proven mechanism of polarisation elsewhere in West Bengal. For example, in 2016, at Mandirbazar, South 24 Parganas (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1), a communal conflict started because of disagreements between Hindus and Muslims over the use of loudspeakers at Keshabeswar temple. The devotees at the temple were playing *Hari nam sankirtan* round the clock which created a problem for the adjacent mosque to organise Aazan the ritual prayer during the month of Ramzan. The local market committee tried to resolve this by allocating time restrictions for the use of loudspeakers, but their effort failed as RSS, VHP and Hindu Sanhati disagreed on the proposal. Meanwhile, TMC

and local Jamaat organisations also used the opportunity to raise the conflict. One of the RSS leaders said in August 2017, “Muslims tried to bring down the loudspeaker from our temple and Hindus were also ready for a combat. Our people prevented the Muslims from entering into the temple. In response the Muslims destroyed a few shops owned by the Hindus. Our men also retaliated and destroyed some of the Muslim shops.” I came to know that the round-the-clock *Hari nam sankirtan* that too during the month of Ramzan was unprecedented. It is clear that the Hindutva organisations were successful in problematising an old and everyday Islamic ritual like Naamaz through loudspeakers. As the local administration intervened in the matter, the temple committee was asked to switch off the loudspeaker during the Naamaz prayer. This intervention was portrayed as TMC Administration’s conspiracy to convert West Bengal into “mini Pakistan.”

Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti and percolation of Hindutva

Except for the places like Ramrajatala in Howrah where Ram Navami is celebrated since time immemorial, the festival doesn’t hold much significance in West Bengal. In places like Asansol where coal mining attracted many people from north India, small-scale Ram Navami is celebrated since the colonial period. These are mostly organised by local *Akhra* – the place used in physical training. Since 2015–2016 Ram Navami became one of the major fulcrums for politics to revolve around in West Bengal. Durgotsav, the most conspicuous festival of the state, has been under TMC’s control since the formation of the party in 1998 (Nath, forthcoming). TMC’s active involvement in sponsoring different small-scale, localised festivals and fairs is also notable which makes it difficult for other political parties to penetrate (Nath, 2018; Chapter 2). BJP, RSS and VHP in an attempt to form their brand of “cultural misrecognition” attempted to invent traditions and Ram Navami is the most significant among them. Lord Rama, Ram for Bengali-speaking people as a cult, doesn’t have much of a place in Bengali culture or religious spectrum. None of us ever heard of Ram as a significant God, rather Ram has been seen as a character of an epic. Ram has been ridiculed in everyday use of the Bengali language. *Ramchhagol*, *Rampantha*, *Handaram* and many more are quasi-slangs used in defining extreme form of stupidity. The famous nonsense-satirical poet Sukumar Ray has a couple of characters like *Ram Gorurer Chhana* and *Gangaram* in his famous *Hajabarala* both representing stupidity in different senses. Another famous poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote *Meghnadh Badh kavya* where he deconstructed the entire *Ramayana* to make Ravan and his brother Meghnadh a tragic hero and made Ram appear like a feeble and fragile character. Parts of these texts not only are included in classroom teaching but have also become part of Bengali childhood. Consequently, one can clearly assume that Ram never occupied any significant position in

the Bengali ideology or imagination. One has to re-invent Ram as a supreme power, the lord Rama of North India to make it a political game changer. The Hindutva organisations started to use their already existing grassroots organisations to popularise an otherwise insignificant Ram by organising Ram Navami rally and sloganeering “Jai Shree Ram” as an alternative to Islamic slogans and TMC’s slogans.

In 2017, for the first time, Ram Navami carried a political statement. It was organised by VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal, Durga Shakti, Hindu Sanhati and others throughout the state. Thousands of saffron-clad Hindutva workers organised bike processions, tableau of Ram, Sita and Hanuman with high-volume DJ Music frequently chanting Jai Shree Ram characterised the Ram Navami. These rallies involved trident, sword and other weapons (see Figure 5.2). It kept repeating every year since then and quickly became the most conspicuous people, party and fundamentalism merging point. Interestingly, local people of Ramrajatala refused to politicise their age-old traditional Ram Navami procession (Banerjee, 2017), while it became a politics-religion interface in other places. In 2018, a couple of riots broke out, one at Kankinara and another one at Asansol-Ranigunj from the Ram Navami rallies. The younger son of local Imam of Asansol and a balloon seller in Kankinara lost their lives in the riot. Both of these riots are connected to



Figure 5.2 A moment from Ram Navami rally organised by Hindu Sanhati Mancha in Chandannagar in 2017

Source: photo taken by the author

provocations from the rally (see Chapter 6 for more details). The chief minister, TMC supremo Ms. Mamata Banerjee's instant reaction to the Jai Shree Ram slogan which was shouted at her in Bhatpara on May 30, 2019, has further fuelled the politico-religious division and encouraged BJP supporters to make it their battle cry (see, for example, *The Economic Times*, 2019). As many as seven people were detained because of the sloganeering at her, but a video showing her reaction had gone viral and one can make out it furthered the politico-religious division.

The percolation of the Hindutva element through VHP-RSS-BJP-Bajrang dal is strong enough to mend other political parties, most conspicuously the TMC to follow the line of Hindutva. While BJP and its IT cell citing several examples "stablisthed" TMC as a Muslim appeaser, TMC showed a desperation to project their care for the Hindu sentiments. They began to celebrate Hanuman Jayanti – another least known festival in the state. Cabinet minister Mr. Sadhan Pandey installed the tallest Hanuman statue in Ultadanga, Kolkata, which can easily be seen as the epitome of insecurity brought by the Hindutva brigade to the ruling party of the state. Despite efforts being made, TMC's Hanuman Jayanti couldn't get as much popularity as Ram Navami by BJP did. Eventually in 2018, TMC decided to actively organise the Ram Navami rally to give BJP a tough competition. Durgotsav carnival, Municipal tax waiver to the Durgotsav committees and in 2020 direct transfer of Rs. 50,000 to every Durgotsav committee are some of the indications of TMC's desperate move to strike a balance between alleged appeasement of both Hindus and Muslims. This, according to many, I have interacted with, is a result of the rise of the BJP.

Ganga Aarati

Ganga Aarati even in places which defines the spectacle like Varanasi is an invented tradition (Das et al., 2020). Its popularity and the politico-religious significance have made the Hindutva organisations to use it as a means of spreading Hindutva sentiments in West Bengal. It was 2012 when I first came to know about Ganga Aarati being organised at different places in Hooghly and North 24 Parganas. Places like Ariyadaha by 2017 got a tract of land from Barahanagar Municipality for the construction of a temple to conduct Ganga Aarati. At present on every evening, a Ganga Aarati is organised at different places near the jute mill adjacent regions beside the river Hooghly. It includes places like Chandannagar, Srirampur, Naihati, Bally and of late at Ramkrishnapur Ghat, which is just opposite to Babu ghat of Kolkata. Today a ferry through the river Hooghly towards the north will result in witnessing a series of Ganga Aarati being performed around the dusk. Each of these ghats has different organisations using different names, usually the name of the ghat itself.¹ In my ethnographic works for the last few years on the riots in Chandannagar, Naihati, Hajinagar and Kankinara Bhatpara,

I have been told repeatedly that Ganga Aarati at the river bank has a lot to do with the proliferation of Hindutva sentiments in people's everyday life. In 2017, at Naihati, one of the Muslim local school teachers stated:

The organisations are filled with people from VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal. They also involve Durga Shakti members for the arrangements of the Aarati . . . they are the same people who fill political rallies for BJP, or organise Ram Navami celebration . . . there are TMC members too. You cannot really tell what is happening here. Police do not take these things seriously, or are instructed to ignore incidents such as display of arms, stick and sword fight sessions organised by RSS to intimidate Muslims.

I have noted similar responses from the RSS workers in the region too. They were busy in taking pride in the fact that they could organise local Hindus through such physical fitness sessions and “cultural” programmes like Ganga Aarati.

There is no harm in keeping oneself fit. Aakhara has been part of every Hindu culture through ages. We are just bringing them back. One should worship Ganga Mata, you should too. . . . Communists have damaged all our heritages; TMC is trying to convert West Bengal into a ‘mini Pakistan’; only RSS can save Hindus. – told by Birju Chowdhury in April 2018

Masculinity connecting hypernationalism, and hatred

After the 2018 Asansol riot, I had a long conversation with one of the local Bajrang Dal supporters in Chandannagar. He was an active TMC member earlier but left TMC because he felt that TMC was “destroying Hindus in West Bengal.” I asked him what is special about joining Bajrang dal and BJP, his reply was interesting “BJP ne humari mardangi lauta diya” – BJP has gifted our masculinity back. I have encountered similar reflections among many others who work with RSS and actively engage with the fitness training camps or are attached with Akharas at places like Asansol.

As Figure 5.2 shows, the Ram Navami rally has become the platform to display the stock of weapons, and performances with them (e.g. Figure 5.3). Around 2017–2018, many cars, bikes and e-rickshaws started to use a saffron sticker of an aggressive Hanuman face. I received a range of responses about the reasons for which people all of a sudden started liking this particular sticker. Many said that it's simply because everyone is using it, and it's a trend, while a significant proportion of responses also had connotations like Hanuman is a saviour, warrior and that using it in their



Figure 5.3 A mock fight between participants of Ram Navami rally in Sri Rampur in 2018

Source: photograph taken by the author

cars results in bringing an aggressive look to their cars. The aggressive face embodies their emotions as well.

The masculinity has deeper connotations to connect hypernationalism, Ram Navami and hatred towards the Muslims with a single thread. With February 2019 Pulwama attack, a few months before the Parliamentary election which would choose Narendra Modi-led BJP for its second-term masculinity was much more revealing. This was the first time when Ram Navami in many parts of the state used tableau imitating the Indian army (Figure 5.4).

Bharat Mata image was there from the beginning of the rally in 2017, at least in places like Chandannagar and Sri Rampur (Figure 5.5), but in 2019, it occupied the central position of the procession. In Asansol where a large-scale riot took place in 2017, people recall a tableau with Bharat Mata facing its enemy with a characteristic Islamic feature with beard and fez. Bharat Mata's protector is an army man decked in saffron head scarf. Displays such as these along with processions with weapons and songs using derogatory terms for the Muslims became characteristics of these processions.



Figure 5.4 A 2019 Ram Navami tableau using army-like protecting figure decked with saffron flags

Source: photograph taken by the author

Masculinity that connects these rallies with hypernationalism and Hindutva includes at least three mechanisms, viz., a) a projection of hatred towards Pakistan, b) an internalised (programmed) perception of the crisis of the country in terms of not being able to deal with the historical injustice to its people (mostly by the Congress regimes) and c) an overt manifestation of a particular lifestyle (read Manu dictated Brahminical Hindu lifestyle). In an age of simulations as Baudrillard (1983) sees. Media ceases to be a mirror of reality but becomes the reality itself, sometimes more real than reality – the hyperreality. The idea of Kashmir and Pakistan for Indian appears to be a classic case of hyperreality or a simulacra and simulation of the simulacra. Signs such as these are promoted, repeated again and again uncontested through a variety of popular media and IT cell to form what can be seen as powerful simulacra. It results in a condition where the distinction between signs and reality is imploding. It becomes increasingly difficult to tell the real from those things that simulate the real. Therefore, items that the entire public sphere is fed are bizarre, scandalous irreverent, promiscuous and playful. As Kellner (1993) says carnivalesque and spectacle, therefore, all we need to do is to forget everything including our everyday dissatisfaction and concentrate on a carnivalesque be it an attack on soldiers or a counterattack



Figure 5.5 Moment from a Ram Navami rally in Chandannagar in 2019. Note the depiction of *Bharat Mata* in between Hanuman and Vivekananda

Source: photograph taken by the author

to the “enemy territory” or perhaps more penetrating a simulacra of such tableau that connects masculinity, hypernationalism and hatred.

The success of Hindutva organisations in Bengal lies with the fact that it has successfully trapped every sphere of public transactions, including its political opponents into Hindutva sentiment. TMC’s failed attempt to carve out alternative Hindutva elements through Hanuman Jayanti, sloganeering by using “Joy Maa Kali”² – tapping the popular Kali cult, using traditional Hindu Conch shell sound and ulu dhoni³ in different rallies indicates a desperation in a space which was successfully occupied by the Hindutva brigade topped with BJP as a political opponent. The political spheres have failed to uphold the rich reform history of so-called Bengal Renaissance but trapped in the spectacle creating Hindutva politics. However, the TMC’s attempts look fragile, inconsistent and desperate when one compares it with the organised move by the Hindutva organisations. For the Hindutva organisations, their synchronised move cross-cutting different spheres like

feeding Ram Navami rallies by Durgashakti, Bajrang Dal together, organising Ganga aarati by similar organisations or making Hanuman temple as a strong grassroots symbol to legitimise *Ghar Wapasi* programme are all reflections of stronger institutional synchronisations.

West Bengal well before the second term of TMC in 2016 was already communally polarised with strong Islamic and Hindutva organisations. The communal sentiment continues to dominate and deepen the Hindu–Muslim divide within the public sphere during much of the second term of TMC’s rule. While visibly the electoral benefit of this polarisation went in favour of BJP since 2014 (see Figure 3.3, Chapter 3), simply because of the consolidation of Majoritarian sentiments and conversion of such sentiments into votes, societal fissures are far more complicated. The epitome of such complication is a disturbing rise in the number and nature of riots which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 One can follow the link to see a video of Ganga Aarati performance in Kolkata, recorded and uploaded by *India Today*. www.indiatoday.in/india/video/ganga-aarti-resumes-in-full-glory-in-kolkata-1394540-2018-11-23.
- 2 The oath taking ceremony in Parliament in 2019 has seen the use of religious-political terms like Jai Shree Ram, Allah ho Akbar and also Joy Maa Kali.
- 3 A howling sound pronounced roughly as orchestrated “ulululululu” that made by Hindu Bengali women during any religious occasions or life cycle rituals.

WHEN FUNDAMENTALISTS MEET

The riots

The hatred for Muslims among a large section of Bengali Hindus has its roots in partition memories and memories of “great Calcutta killing,” Noakhali riot, to name a few. A considerable proportion of our childhood learning was filled with a cultural learning of the difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. We have learned several stereotypes which include cultural constructs like “they eat beef,” “they are smelly,” “they live in ghettos,” “they are extremely conservative,” “they are aggressive because of their food habit and sexual urge,” “they eat on their bed,” “they share their food and do not consider it dirty and unclean pick out food from a common pool and eat,” “they have strong fundamentalist sentiments” and “they have displaced Hindus from Bangladesh.” Phrases like “Mollar dour Masjid por-jonto” – A Mullah knows nothing beyond the mosque, or “Chacha aapaon, Chachi por, Chachi-r Maiya Biya kor” – ridiculing their parallel cousin marriage practice are still very much in everyday use. Along with these, there are new idioms popularised by social media like “lungi bahini” – as Narendra Modi ridiculed anti-CAA protesters and played a communal card by saying that one can identify who are protesting against CAA by their clothes; “Tupi wala, daari wala” ridiculing Islamic beard or fez. Perhaps the most derogatory one is “Katar Bachha”/“kata” and “katua” – ridiculing the Islamic practice of circumcision. Similarly, Muslims hated to see Hindu houses being decked with cow dung and ridicule them for worshipping too many gods. They find it insane to see people worshipping cow as their mother and find it heartless to burn one’s relatives or friends after they die. I remember ours was the only mud-floored, terracotta-roofed wooden-plank-supported house in our neighbourhoods. All my friends at least had a cemented floored house. My mother used to apply a mix of cow dung and mud to re-plaster the floor at least once a week. I hated the smell, and remember refusing my mother to feed me with the same hand that was used for mixing and applying the cow dung. My only Muslim friend then, Seikh Rakib Ali, used to tell me on face that he just cannot tolerate my mother using cow dung just like that. I recall once he said it in front of his father, a local Congress follower, who slapped right across his face and made it a point that he comes to our

house every once in a while. This, however, as I know was an exception. My friend at AAMRA ek sachetan prayas forum, Subhpratik Roy Chowdhuri, once recalled how a Muslim girl was shocked to see people burning a dead body in a wooden hearth. The dead body because of rigor mortis or pugilistic attitude started to move up and people in the vicinity started to beat the body with bamboo shaft so that it doesn't fall from hearth or the *chita*. The sight itself is terrifying especially to a person who has witnessed it for the first time. The Muslim boy accompanying her explained it to her as a brutal Hindu practice.

These anecdotes are needed for an outsider to understand the nature and extent of cultural differences in everyday Muslim and Hindu life. These differences are both historically informed (Laitin and Posner, 2001; Thapar, 2014) and have electoral intentions (Brass, 2005; Pai, 2013; Wilkinson, 2004). These are solidified to increase the tension between communities (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). The creation of communal tension is informed by broader structural features of civil society and government, making it important to better understand the mechanisms which shape the potential for communal violence (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Brass, 1991, 2005; Anand, 2005). Constructivists explore the mechanisms of stereotyping and its relationship to identity construction, marginalisation and communal violence (Banerjee, 2008; Robinson, 2005; Gupta, 2011; Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2012). I have been concentrating on religious polarisation and riots in West Bengal for about the last seven years (see, for example Nath and Roy Chowdhury, 2019a, 2019b; Nath, 2019, 2020a, forthcoming). Based on my ethnographic experiences, I have failed to link these riots in a chronological order primarily because of its randomness. While the impact of riots is linear, i.e. a linear progress with each riot adding something to the dominant divisive narrative, the nature of riots is random and unpredictable. There are several major domains like social media, religious processions, conflicts preconditioned with parallel celebration of religious processions like Muharram and Bijaya Dashami, spatial conflicts and location uniqueness linked with riots. In my ethnographic work on the riots, I have seen many of these major domains are put into action. As has already been discussed, a hatred-filled ground was prepared and the riots are the dreaded outcome of momentary conflicts which failed to have resolved peacefully.

Riots in and around the jute mills

Jute industry was the backbone of British Calcutta (Sethia, 1996; Sailer, 2015). To get an idea of the nature and extent of the Jute industry, one can see that in 1911–12, Bengal produced 8 million jute bales (one bale =1.8 quintal). This has to be seen in comparison to the global demand which was about 9 million bales. Calcutta mills in 1914 were consuming 50% of the total crop of the region (Sethia, 1996). India had 106 mills. Most of them

were located near Calcutta, in the districts of Howrah, Hooghly and in 24 Parganas (Ahmad, 1950). Understandably, the prosperous jute industries in and around Calcutta attracted workers from all over the country, especially from the neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. Over the years, jute industries experienced a sharp decline for a variety of reasons ranging from the partition which led to the shortage of raw material to the rise of alternative fibres (Ahmad, 1950; Sengupta, 2018). Those who migrated from different corners of the country didn't leave the places adjacent to the jute mills. They settled down for generations forming distinctive sub-cultures (Basu, 2012–2013). As some of the age-old workers recall once prosperous collie lines have transformed into labour colony shanties over the years. Unemployment, poverty, violence and constant threat from local goons have created an ideal place for mushrooming religious fundamentalism in the Jute-mill adjacent settlements. Since 2016, I have been regularly visiting a couple of these places one at Kankinara-Bhatpara near the Kankinara jute mill and another one at Naihati-Hajinagar near the Hukum Chand jute mill. Both of these places have experienced riots and political violence at different times, and a lot of which owes to the very nature of the settlement of the labour colonies.

Life inside the labour colonies

Labour colonies are popularly known as “lines” because of their earlier linear settlements. There are different names for such lines, like Darma line named after the bamboo sliced fences used in making the labour colony houses; tina gudam line – named after an iron sheet made warehouse which has now disappeared. Today, they have become clusters of shanties with extremely narrow, damp and smelly alleyways. Be it hot summer or chilling winter the air inside these clusters appears heavy and smelly. Sunlight touches the earth only for a few minutes, making it difficult for the people to maintain the cleanliness of their clothes or the household. The alleyways and corners of each of the crossings are full of plastics, spits, leftover food-stuff and faeces. Where there is a drain, one can spot the country liquor bottles, and gutkha packets either floating or choking them. At times, you will wonder with sheer disbelief that how kids can play with used napkins and condoms! With time, you will believe that it is happening every day and they grow up like that. Monsoon makes it even worse. On several occasions, I had to come back from Kankinara station because the alleyways were filled with wastewater where everything that we consider dirt kept floating and entering into the shanties. The officially allotted quarters for the jute mill labourers include a small room about 100 square feet and an adjacent balcony of about 60 square feet, are just enough for a bachelor or may be for a married couple and a child to live. However, in each of these official quarters, on average five to seven people reside. Some even accommodate

10–12 people. There are different tiered beds to accommodate more people. Understandably whatever public space is available has also encroached. There is a community bathing place, for men, it is open, and for women, it is surrounded by a high wall (Figure 6.1).

There are community toilets nearby. These are square, high plinth brick constructions. Each one is about 2000–2500 square feet in size. From the outside, they have a rough resemblance to massive old tank-like construction. Inside people openly defecate and the excreta are stored inside the tank forever. There are separate staircases for men and women to enter, but once entered, there is no separate compartment to maintain privacy nor any cover over the fresh and old excreta (Figure 6.2). A settler would therefore wake up here from a cramped position, go to the community bathing centre to brush the teeth, then climb up the staircase for defecation, come back to the shanty to have something and then either will go to the community bathing place to take bath or go out for work and then come back and take bath. Understandably whatever common space is available inside these settlements is used for a variety of purposes.



Figure 6.1 The community bathing place in Bhatpara

Source: photograph taken by the author in 2019



Figure 6.2 A community toilet (No. 4) in Bhatpara. The left staircase is for women and the right one is for men

Source: photograph taken by the author in 2019

In tina gudam area, a small tract of land is still open where different alleyways meet. I have seen Muslims making preparation for Muharram and there is a saffron flex print carrying “jai shree ram” slogan nearby. The high plinth on the right is used for keeping the Muharram Tajia and also for holding Hindu festivals like Saraswati Puja, Ganesh Puja or even Ram Navami (Figure 6.3). “Hindu-Muslim, UP-Behari, all sit together, eat together, shit together” – a 66-year-old retired mill worker reflected.

While there are instances of co-habitation such as this, people’s everyday existence entails regular conflicts in accessing constantly depleting common facilities like toilet, bathing place and water. Every day at one place or the other there is evidence of low-intense violence between families or groups. These range from mutual verbal abuse to physical assault. Furthermore, there is accumulated wrath which ranges from “illegal” constructions within the colonies by force to extra-marital affairs between neighbours. Even though commonplace is used for celebrating festivals of both faiths, there is hardly any evidence of inter-community participation except for the children. After a series of riots in these places, even kids are not allowed



Figure 6.3 The open space at Tina Gudam. Note the coexistence of Ram Navami poster and Muharram flags being arranged

to participate in intercommunity festivals. In Bhatpara, for example, kids have even stopped sharing their lunch and teachers report to have received “orders” from the local power groups to allot sections, or arrange benches according to their faith.

The political economy of everyday communalism in and around labour colonies

What is happening inside the schools in Bhatpara is indicative of the nature of communal divide in the entire region.

It began with a sudden rise in the sentiments related to Milad-un-Nabi as an alternative to Saraswati Puja to be celebrated in the schools, continued with Arjun Singh becoming Arjun Khan, Mamata Banerjee becoming Mumtaj Begum (symbolically projecting local MLA and the Chief Minister as Muslim appeasers), accumulated with the notification of stopping Durgotsav idol immersion on the day of Muharram and finally Ram Navami added the spark

and the entire region was set ablaze. – as told by one of the local Muslim residents in a group discussion in 2019.

Bhatpara experienced regular Hindu/Muslim conflicts since 2019. It aggravated because of the political turmoil resulting from Arjun Singh's changing political affiliation from TMC to BJP during the 2019 election (more about it shortly). It is important to see how the communalism actually percolated inside people's everyday life in Jute mill areas. It happened not only in Bhatpara but also in Naihati-Hajinagar.

While the nature of settlement throughout the labour colonies appears a chaotic hodgepodge, there is a clear religious division even within the small tracts of land. For example, Darma line and 14 No. line are exclusively Muslim ghettos and Tina Gudam has lane-wise divisions between Hindus and Muslims. There are widespread rumours based on people and places. For example, people commonly believed that 14 No. line is infested with criminals. Whoever rules in Bhatpara needs to gain control over the Muslims of 14 No. line area. Even a local activist, otherwise secular and working relentlessly for the restoration of peace in the area argued that "even kids can hurl bombs there. In each of the shanties you will find a few bombs are either kept or are manufactured . . . police knows everything but they do not intervene because of political pressure." Constructs such as TMC is with Muslims and they are encouraging Muslims to attack local Hindus are commonly held. BJP-RSS and their various organisations in response to Namaaz prayer in mosques have started playing Hanuman Chalisa and Gayatri Mantra songs from the local temples. They have also tried to prevent the use of microphones in Kankinara Mosque and have damaged the loudspeakers of Jagaddal Bara Masjid during a riot in 2019. Hindu-dominating areas today carry the RSS flag on each and every lamp post, while in Muslim-dominated areas, they are conspicuously absent. There is a visible silence of the Muslims in Bhatpara since 2019, despite the fact that they were driven off from their homes during the riots. A major reason for such a silence is their numerical strength which is little above 10% (13.43%, to be exact), and the other reason is a consolidation of the dominant Hindu majority and Arjun Singh's shift from TMC to BJP.

Local elites, goons and their leaders locally known as *Bahubali* have formed a complex nexus in jute-mill areas like Bhatpara and Naihati-Hajinagar.¹ Their interface with the mills determines much of the everyday politics and violence in the region. Four out of eight nearby mills in Bhatpara are still in operation. Two kinds of workers are employed: a) the payroll workers who are "permanent" with Employees' State Insurance (ESI) enrolment and b) the casual workers or the *badlis* with zero social security. Mills make effort to reduce the number of payroll workers. *Bahubalis* work as labour suppliers and extort from both the mill owners and the labourers. Labourers keep on paying about 10% of their wage and mills give them

“shelter” in a variety of forms. Mills overlook *bahubali* activities inside the mills. They extort money from the transporters and other contractors and use mill compound for a variety of activities including allegedly drug trafficking and arms dealing. This system is successful in forestalling any labour unrest. One of the payroll labourers argued

Trade union leaders show us nearby bankrupt mills and tell us how difficult it is for the mill owners to run this decaying business. *Bahubalis* do not interrupt in our everyday activities and we do not poke into their activities . . . mills have varieties of labour demand. When the raw materials arrive we need more labourers, but for actual work they are not needed. Because of such uneven requirements mill owners tend to depend on labour suppliers.

The uneven requirement of labourers, general weakening of jute industry and a strong local nexus keep the political economy of this region *Bahubali* dependent and consequently violence prone.

In other places in West Bengal where recent riots have taken place, it is seen that rioters are often outsiders (Nath, 2020a, 2020b; Nath and Roy Chowdhury, 2019a). In Bhatpara, everyday life seems to have been revolving around the *Bahubali*-led violence for quite some time now. In the years of my association with local people, casual workers, goons and party cadres, I have understood that the local political economy has a relatively solidified architecture (see Figure 6.4) and that *Bahubalis* play an extremely important role. One of the local leaders in a group discussion in presence of some of the local goons argued, on conditions of anonymity:

Everything that Bhatpara stands for is different from rest of West Bengal. You can compare our place with places like Asansol where Coal Mafias operate. If you want to win elections you have to have a good understanding with them . . . the moment you lose your understanding [control] you will lose . . . TMC has lost their control, as people understand a single [charismatic] name [indicating Arjun Singh] and not a party. Time demanded that Arjun Singh joins the majority, he joined BJP and won.

Although Bhatpara has an overwhelming Hindu majority, one cannot ignore the presence of Muslims among the goons. TMC with Arjun Singh had complete control over the *Bahubalis* and goons of this region. “He [Arjun Singh] was so close to the Muslims that he earned a bad nickname, ‘Arjun Khan’ among Hindus. His political shift has created a leadership vacuum among the Muslims.” – said one of the local Muslim residents. This shift was a big loss for the Muslims. They lost the TMC’s apparent secular shell that was

used to protect Muslims from the local Hindu goons and BJP followers. Muslims couldn't join a party that openly chants "Jai Shree Ram."

It is important to have absolute control over them if you want to rule Bhatpara and Arjun Singh could keep them under control. You will often read that one or the other gang member is arrested by the police, etc., all these are eyewashes . . . we know them. They fake everything. Police releases them soon and they are back in business in no time!

[Told by one of the local TMC cadres
in a Group Discussion in July 2019]

The architecture (Figure 6.4) experienced a shock with Arjun Singh's change of political camp. Muslim goons had to find out new avenues. With this change, local Hindu TMC cadres were virtually taken over by BJP overnight and Hindu-Muslim cleavage became more prominent. Muslim goons lost their "resources" from the Mills and connections to *Bahubalis*. This situation has escalated the chances of riots. One of the local activists argues that Muslims were used as election-winning machinery for quite a long.

They were given free arms and freedom to do violence during and after elections to keep political-economic equation intact . . . suddenly with BJP's increasing popularity goons are divided into Hindu-Muslims. We are hearing that Muslims are overdoing things. But Muslims were Muslims and they were made to overdo things for decades now.

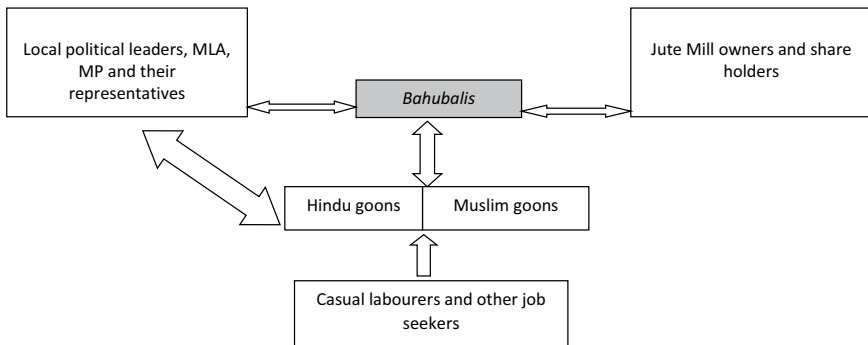


Figure 6.4 Political economic inter-dependence in Bhatpara and also at Naihati-Hajinagar area

Source: Fieldwork data

Arjun Singh and his machinery have allowed RSS to step in and continue their coveted Hindutva activity over the years. Ram Navami rally, Ganga Aarati, Durga Shakti training camps, presence of RSS flags in every Hindu locality and celebration of Hanuman Jayanti were all used systematically to give RSS a space among the Hindi-speaking Hindus inside Bhatpara. In June 2019, we² had the following conversation with a local youth, apparently a BJP supporter at a tea stall

Youth: a section of BJP didn't want Arjun Singh to get BJP's candidature, they even wrote a letter to the state level leadership, but they replied that it is difficult to beat Arjun Singh. We were assured that whatever he has done before with Muslims, BJP party won't allow now. So the same BJP workers who were beaten up by TMC Muslims have now accepted Arjun Singh as their leader on one condition.

Us: What condition?

Youth: To be able to beat back the local Muslims and drive them out of this place.

Us: So now that you have beaten them up, you must let the peace prevail.

Youth: Who am I to control them? They will not stop until Muslims are driven out from this place.

Us: Are you a BJP member?

Youth: No one is BJP here. You cannot be BJP openly. Police will take you to custody. I am a proud Hindu.

On several occasions, I have encountered constructs like "Muslims overdid things," "Hindus are in danger," "Is it wrong to be a Hindu in this country?," "Why Chief Minister has a problem with Jai Shree Ram slogan?,"³ "So many Hindus died and no one from TMC came, instead they were all given allegation that they were rioters, but see the Muslims, they got compensation from TMC," "Hindus have to wake up," "Madan Mitra brought Muslims from Kamarhati and attacked us because we are Hindus and we voted for Hindustan" and "TMC is using administration to silence the voices of the Hindus." All these indicate a strong communalisation and a lack of trust on local administration. Notably, there is a change in the nature and extent of the use of such constructs. In 2018, people used to say these things in one-to-one interviews. The tone was of making us convinced to the "facts" they believed in. The same people within a year started to say these and use slang against the Muslims openly in group discussions. Meanwhile, Muslims kept complaining more and more about the loss of their livelihoods, lives and polarisation by BJP. Election-related conflicts, regular riots, Ram Navami event and a highly polarised electorate are some of the reasons which transformed the region and have a spillover effect on the state

at large. Increasingly, the narrative of “*Hindu Khatre me hai*” – Hindus are in Danger became dominant. We could see news reports from national media like the Times of India (2019b) reporting “Bhatpara strongman and Barrackpore’s BJP MP Arjun Singh is perhaps facing the toughest challenge in his political career. This is first time that Singh has to operate against the state administration.” Bhatpara, along with a significant part of West Bengal, began to strongly subscribe to the notion that TMC is a Muslim appeaser. They have used Muslims to corner the Hindu majority of the state to secure electoral gain. BJP tried to project Arjun Singh as a “victim” and also a symbol of a Hindu in danger, who would try to save Hindus of Bengal from the Islamic terrorists supported by TMC. Media reports of Arjun Singh being attacked and images of him dealing with street goons have successfully aided to the construct.⁴

More recently, after Arjun Singh’s change of political camp and with a distinctive presence of BJP in the state, existing jute mills have refused to give employment to the Muslims. For example, a member of Hukum Chand Chhatai Majdur Ekta Manch (an association of jobless labourers of Hukum Chand Jute Mill) in a group discussion argued that, since the rise of BJP’s power in the region large Hindi-speaking shareholders like A. K. Shukla, R. K. Srivastava and Naradmani Mishra have informally declared a strategy of not recruiting any Muslim workers in the mill. “Since the Chinese machines⁵ have come, labour demand has fallen significantly and they have selectively reduced much more Muslims than Hindus and the trend is continuing,” he said. In fact, a leader of the association reflected “the mill management has a coveted understanding with the local *Bahubalis* who are now closely associated with BJP-RSS gang. TMC’s association with the Muslim goons have not only made them a marginal force.” Hajinagar area which falls within the Naihati Municipality has only 7% of Muslims and 92.34% Hindu. Understandably, it is relatively easy for the Mill management and BJP-RSS joint force to get away with alienating Muslims.

2016 riots at Chandannagar and Hajinagar, Naihati

RSS-linked organisations such as Bajrang Dal and Durga Bahini along with BJP kept fanning the communal sentiments when for the first time an unwritten Hindu–Muslim mutual agreement regarding the code and conduct of local charismatic Mazar of Chashma Baba was broken in 2015. The Mazar was built by a Hindu Marwari Hiralal Shaw after the death of Yusuf Kamal, also known as the Chashma Baba. Both Hindus and Muslims are regular worshippers of the Mazar, and perhaps it bears the hallmark of Hindu–Muslim co-existence in the region. It was agreed that no Hindu religious procession will go through Harish Mitra Road on which the Mazar is located and that no Muslim will sell beef nearby. The code of conduct was broken by a Hindu Gayatri family who took the procession of Gayatri

worship through the road. Muslims in large number gathered and Hindus reciprocated. Local administration managed the situation well, but according to many, Ram Navami and Muharram rallies became much more aggressive in 2015. On August 15, 2016, an allegation was made that a Muslim youth had torn apart an Indian national flag in the evening. I came to know that the boy was a drug addict and a known antisocial person. He was beaten up by Hindus as the flag he allegedly tore down was located inside a Hindu locale. In response, local Hindus took up the streets and set fire to a few Muslim-owned shops. It was stopped by quick police action. It was the time when I could feel an increasing hatred between Hindus and Muslims. Narratives like Muslims are overdoing things, they have been allowed to do whatever they want to do, they need a lesson, we are now ready to confront them, etc., kept floating in people's everyday conversations. I came to know that a couple of teachers from Adarsha Hindi High School, a government-sponsored school, actively organised Rath Yatra under the leadership of Vijay Shaw, a local RSS leader. The school allegedly promotes the Hindu/Muslim divide among the students, but then again what happens at school is merely a reflection of the locality which feeds the school.

The triggering event of the 2016 riot was a Government Order which asked not to bring out the Idol immersion procession a day after Bijaya Dashami – the end of Durgotsav, which is the most popular festival of West Bengal. A day after Bijaya Dashami was Muharram. Traditionally, on the day of Muharram – a festival of grief and mourning, Muslims arrange for processions. They carry weapons like knives, swords in the procession and use self-injury as a means of expressing grief. Given the already polarised condition, the state decided to stall the idol immersion procession so that situations in which aggressive rallies face each other can be avoided. Police administration used a loudspeaker asking Hindus not to bring out idol immersion procession on the day of Muharram. A local Muslim activist in 2017 said “Muharram is not a festival per se, it is a display of sorrow, it is a day of sadness and mourning. Chief Minister should have talked to a few Imams before declaring this decision. This decision was unacceptable even to the common Hindus let alone RSS Bajrang dal members . . . this decision transformed Mamata Banerjee into Mumtaz Begum.” Two riots took place on October 11 and 12 at two places, one at Urdipara and Laxmigunj, Chandannagar and another one at Hajinagar, Naihati. In Urdipara and Laxmigunj, a few people from the idol immersion procession selectively vandalised some of the Muslim-owned shops of the Laxmigunj market. In response, on October 12, Muslims from Muharram rally reciprocated. Ram Navami rally started here in April 2016 for the first time. Earlier people, especially the Hindi-speaking people from North India used to celebrate the day by keeping a saffron flag and by worshipping Ram inside their own houses. The local MLA Ashoke Sahoo, as several Hindus from Lichupatti said, started the armed Ram Navami rally in 2016. Ashoke Sahoo, even though, was an

MLA from the ruling TMC, he was also a member of the RSS. Both Hindus and Muslims indicated that it was the Ram Navami armed rally that started consolidating Hindu–Muslim sentiments. Md. Sakrel, one of the local furniture shop owners, lost his newly bought motorcycle. It was broken down by the people from the rally. In 2017, his son argued that “Imagine it happened with us, despite of the fact I myself work for Calcutta Police. Local police said that this is a small incident and we should not make it an issue, but how can local administration allow an armed rally of 2000 to 2500 people without police protection?” In continuation of the Ram Navami, the Idol immersion procession too was unusually large that year. It was organised by people from Bajrang dal, RSS and also by Shiv Sena. “we wanted to make it a point that Hindus are not weak any more, even though TMC has their Mumtaz Begum as a saviour, we are also united . . . we did nothing in comparison to what they did on the day of Muharram. If police and administration takes their side we don’t care, we Hindus are now united!” was a reflection of a retired state government employee, Biswanath Mitra, also a member of the Bajrang Dal. On the day of Muharram, Muslims also gathered in large numbers with slogans like Allah-hu-Akbar and Nara-e-takbeer. They targeted several Hindu-owned shops. They have used swords to break open a few shops and then vandalised them. While the looting and vandalism of shops appear small, the impact of such riots further polarised and consequently we saw a large-scale riot in Chandannagar in 2020. A much large-scale riot took place in Hajinagar, Naihati near the Hukum Chand Mill. Here, for the first time, “Jai Shree Ram” slogan was used by the Idol immersion procession on October 11, 2016. The rally was organised primarily by Bajrang Dal and RSS. They brought people from outside and kept poking the local Muslims. There is a small Mazar in the Indian paper pulp industry, surrounding which there is a small Muslim settlement of about 10–12 families. The people from the rally hurled stones towards the Mazar. On the very next day, the Muharram rally became much aggressive and big. Someone hurled a bomb towards the Indian paper pulp mill, near the Mazar. “Aged Muslims from the organising committee wanted to stop the Muharram procession and kept the tazia at the mosque adjacent to the mill to avoid any further conflicts. However, with police assurance they continued but cut short the procession. On the next day when they took out the tazia from the mosque suddenly they were attacked. Bombs were hurled causing minor injury to three Muslims. Police immediately arrested some of the Hindu goons before they could escape . . . before anyone could understand anything Muslims in large number came out with sword and attacked at Hindu shops nearby” was how the incident is being told as I could gather the story over many visits to the place.

This attack on the Hindu shop owners fuelled further communalisation that was impossible to stop. Local people alleged that police were reluctant and never take up the challenge of ameliorating an already heated condition.

While the Muslims started attacking, around 12:00 noon, police only came around 2:30 pm. However, on several occasions, I encountered people who were saved by their neighbouring Muslims. Quazi Rasidul Islam, a quack doctor, was beaten up by unknown Muslim goons as he tried to protect a Hindu girl from their potential attempt of dishonouring her. One of the local clubs like Balak Sangha and Nazrul Sangha, both having Hindu and Muslim members, acted as a shield against the outsiders during the riot. Constructs like local administration, TMC, Muslim nexus and Hindus are in danger because of Islamisation of Bengal Government became stronger with such police inaction. Such inaction was used as a justification of what happened on that weekend, i.e. on October 15, 2016. On that night, Hajinagar was surrounded by Hindu goons from 12 different points and they started to hurl bombs everywhere.

You won't believe that five-six bombs were hurled at once at different points and they chanted 'Jai Shri Ram.' We thought that we will not survive. We tried to call everyone, no one responded. They kept bombing for hours, set fire in a few shops and houses. The situation could have worsened if a large police force from outside had not come to stop it . . . paramilitary forces were deployed for weeks, then only the riot stopped. Both Hindus and Muslims have brought outsiders and fuelled the conflict. Every communal organisation is to be found in Hajinagar, both the communities are equally responsible for the massacre.

(Quazi Rasidul Islam in a group discussion in July 2017)

While the MLA of Bijpur, Mr. Subhrangshu Roy and MLA of Naihati, Mr. Tapash Chatterjee, both belonging to the TMC-organised peace-keeping rallies, Subhrangshu Roy's rally was populated with Hindus and Tapash Chatterjee's rally was by Muslims. Later on, in November 2017, Subhrangshu Roy's father Mukul Roy, one of the founders of TMC, joined BJP. Local people in 2016 reflected on the fact that BJP, RSS and Bajrang dal had already established a network with Subhrangshu Roy and that they were encouraged to do violence with a hidden support from TMC.

The 2016 Chandannagar and Hajinagar, Naihati riot was something new in the West Bengal's political landscape. After the Kaliachak violence in January 2016, these riots solidified the following constructs:

- Muslims are overdoing things.
- TMC is openly a Muslim appeasing party.
- Hindus are in danger in West Bengal.
- There is a need for the Hindus to unite and fight against the Muslim-appeasing TMC.

- BJP is the only saviour for the otherwise weak Hindus, even though they are numerically strong.

Post-2016 BJP, RSS and Bajrang Dal as many of their members suggest have started getting momentum in expanding their organisation and getting popular support. They kept organising physical training camps, enthusiastically started organising Ram Navami rally and expanded their temple-based organisations. It took little time for the Ram Navami-led conflicts to become large-scale and widespread riot in nearby places. While the Hajinagar riot showed possibilities for a protest from within the communities, other riots became much more planned and spread rapidly without resistance.

2018 riots at Bhatpara, Kankinara and its continuation

Ram Navami over the years has successfully gained immense popularity among the Hindi-speaking Hindus in and around the jute industrial belt and also elsewhere like Asansol. As already discussed in Chapter 5, TMC became desperate to regain their Hindu support base at these places. Their brand of politics over the years was successfully labelled as a Muslim-appeasing one and their attempt to project themselves as a secular or at least “sarva dharma samabhava” party was rejected by the common people. As a counter of Jai Shree Ram, their Jai Maa Kali, or as a counter to Ram Navami their Hanuman Jayanti failed miserably. Consequently, TMC also decided to actively organise Ram Navami in 2018. Bhatpara riot began with a failed attempt to portray inter-communal harmony through the 2018 Ram Navami that resulted in the death of a balloon seller (Das, 2018). TMC in 2018 decided to organise Ram Navami in Bhatpara, Kankinara area. Priyangshu, a local TMC leader, was organising the event under MLA Arjun Singh’s leadership. It was decided that Muslims would serve water and small refreshments to Hindus participating in the rally.

A few people started teasing the Muslims and played a song in the sound box which meant that ‘*When Hindus will wake up, Muslims will have to remove their skullcap and chant Jai Shree Ram!*’ . . . The Muslims protested and a street fight started.

[told by Md Maqsd Alam, local counsellor
in a Group Discussion in June 2018]

The same song instigated another riot in Asansol in 2018 claiming life of the local Imam’s son.

Arjun Singh intervened . . . Priyangshu with his gang defamed the bust of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, kept hurling bombs and firing from

pistol as they reach at Kantapukur area. Three people and a horse were shot. Kuddus Khan, the balloon seller died succumbing bullet injury.

[a local resident in a Group Discussion in June 2018]

Further violence over the two years killed seven more people including five Hindus and two Muslims. Arjun Singh's decision to join BJP indicates that Ram Navami violence was an attempt to consolidate the Hindu majority. As Nath and Roy Chowdhury (2019a) showed the Hindutva ideology was seeping inside the TMC machinery in jute mill areas, the political conversion for Hindu TMC workers was rather swift. After my repeated conversation with the deceased balloon seller, Kuddus Khan's family and friends, I further explored the neighbouring Hindu settlements. Initially, the Hindus avoided. In August 2019, Subhpratik Roy Chowdhury and I during the fieldwork had a casual conversation at one of the tea stalls. A local Hindu youth showed annoyance in the death of a Muslim. "They must first keep their fez down . . . Bengal is changing; there is no place for fez clad beard Muslims here . . . Mamata has given them enough freedom; it's time that they learn some lesson!" was his reflection. The tea stall owner stopped him but suggested us avoid local Muslims. For them and many others, if it was BJP's 18 parliamentary seats in West Bengal Hindus at places like Bhatpara would not have been alive today. Within a communally charged Bhatpara, two political phenomena set the riot. First, in March 2019, Arjun Singh, the TMC MLA joined BJP and eventually won Barrackpore Parliamentary Constituency (Times of India, 2019a). Second, his son Pawan Kumar Singh won the MLA position left by Arjun Singh. Bhatpara was torn apart in conflicts between followers of Arjun Singh who wanted to establish BJP's control and former TMC's Transport Minister, Madan Mitra. Madan Mitra saw this fight as an opportunity to save his troubled political career.⁶ Everyday violence since then has made many residents procure and keep crude bombs at home as a protection measure. Continuous violence since 2018 Ram Navami can be divided into two major phases: first the election-related violence and second Bhatpara Police Station inauguration-related violence.

Local Muslim goons couldn't stay with Arjun Singh because of his BJP affiliation. Madan Mitra brought outside goons to fight. Bombing continued everyday. . . . They just came in plain dress, bombed and left . . . fearless as they didn't even bother to ride a vehicle like motorcycle to escape. They knew nothing will happen to them.

[Group discussion with the Muslims of ward no. 8,
recorded in August 2019]

Both Hindus and Muslims report the fearlessness of local goons. Major conflict started on May 19 – the Assembly by-election day. Madan Mitra allegedly tried and failed to enter into a polling booth and a TMC-BJP conflict

took place. Bombs hurled, bullets fired and eventually it took a communal turn. Hindus believe that TMC brought Muslims to kill Hindus, but BJP Hindu “saviours” have taught them a lesson. More systematic attack took place on May 22, 2019, that killed Rajesh Shaw who was projected as a rioter. He was a contractual labour of the Kankinara Jute Mill. His family alleged that he was murdered by the Muslim goons under the leadership of Madan Mitra. Local Muslims see this death as an outcome of a police encounter. His family and friends argued that Muslims came in police dress. “They not only shot him, but also chopped off his hand with a sword . . . Fake Police came wearing chappals, Madan Mitra brought Muslims from Kamarhati to kill Hindus” – was his sister-in-law’s version in a group discussion. People supported her enthusiastically. They claimed that post-mortem report is “fabricated.” For weeks, railways services of the Eastern Railway route connecting northern suburban and villages with Kolkata remained interrupted at Kankinara station. People hurled stones on local trains and occupied railway tracks for weeks in protest against the violence and alleged state inaction. Houses and shops were selected, looted and set ablaze with communal intentions. We are yet to find out any Hindu house being looted or burned down.⁷ Muhammad Ayub’s small garment shop near the Jagaddal Bara Masjid was looted, but just on its opposite a relatively large garment shop belonging to Agarwal remained untouched. Irfan Communication Centre, a small mobile shop, was looted and then converted into BJP Party Office. Muhammad Javed’s house at Manik Pir area is also converted into the BJP party office. BJP was looking after the interest of Hindus and TMC became another name for protector of Muslims.

On June 10, 2019, two Muslims in labour colony died with bomb injury – a result of random bombing by notorious goons. Md. Halim, a retired Jute Mill worker, died when a bomb was hurled towards him as he was taking rest outside of his house on a hot summer evening. Mustaq, a local youth, also died succumbing to another bomb injury. Seeing the increasingly unmanageable situation, a new police station was created in the region. Before its inauguration on June 20, 2019, the second phase of violence started. Paramilitary forces were brought to stop the violence (Outlook, 2019). A middle-aged street food seller Dharambir Shaw and a 17-year-old street food seller Rohit Shaw (also known as Ram Babu), both Hindus died in this incident. One of the eye witnesses of the incident recalls:

It was around 10:30 am when we could hear the sound of bombing at labour colony area. Dozens of people tried to move towards that place . . . a group of people started stone pelting towards the new Police Station. Police opened fire. Before we could understand anything we saw blood soaked road and Ram Babu was fallen. We know four more were injured but they survived.

[Recorded in September 2019]

Despite arrests being made and recovery of arms, violence continued for weeks. Nights in Bhatpara even today means the sound of bombing and gunshots. Within a couple of months, on July 6, 2019, a headless body with private parts removed was discovered near the railway track. The head was discovered in a train compartment. It was of Lala Chowdhury, another street food seller.

The way they have chopped off his head and removed his private parts, I am sure it's done by some *kashai* [Muslim Butcher]. No Hindu will have the guts to do such a heinous murder.

[Birju Chowdhury, Lala Chowdhury's father
in a Group Discussion in November 2019]

On July 12, another person named Prabhu Shaw was killed in a police encounter. Media reports confirm his involvement in different criminal activities in the region (Chakraborty, 2019).

Apart from the deaths of Dharambir Shaw and Rohit Shaw who evidently were killed in police crossfire, the general perception regarding the rest of the Hindu murders is associated with Anti-Muslim sentiments. Hindus in Bhatpara do not trust the police and local administration. They strongly believe TMC-led police administration is pro-Muslim. A local activist argues "no TMC leader visited to Hindu victims and no BJP leader visited the Muslim victims. People definitely expect more from the ruling party." Muslims continue to blame BJP goons for the murder of balloon seller Kuddus Khan, Md. Halim and Mustaq. Bhatpara has consolidated several communal stereotypes. Stereotyping Muslims include the following:

- a Muslim goons are with TMC and the administration has given them shelter under police protection. [Hence, it is necessary for the Hindus to consolidate.]
- b Muslims are killers [Each of the Hindu murders is by Muslims supported by TMC].
- c Muslims are to live under Hindu mercy under BJP's leadership [echoing Golwalkar's ideology].
- d Muslims are terrorists – justification to this contention range from internet videos of execution to *Qurbani* in Eid.

Muslims now see Hindus as their natural enemy. Their stereotypes include the following:

- a BJP under the leadership of Arjun Singh is mobilising Hindus to attack Muslims. It started with Ram Navami and never ended.
- b TMC's fight against BJP is basically Muslims' fight against the Hindus.

- c Muslims were used by Arjun Singh and Hindus are now given freehand to attack them. [TMC is the only option left.]
- d Hindus bring terror. Jai Shree Ram is something to be afraid of.
- e Hindus will keep on hurling bombs, set fire to Muslim households and rob them; no one can stop it.

One of the most striking features of Bhatpara, Kankinara riot is the sustenance of intense riots for months. Despite the deployment of police and paramilitary forces, this riot has disrupted important railway connectivity, and Bhatpara continued to remain out of control. Perhaps Bhatpara before the Assembly election 2021 carries the symbols of the grand narratives of state politics revolving around a party-identity nexus. As many of my informants argue one cannot be a Hindu and TMC simultaneously in Bhatpara, let alone being a BJP Muslim in the area. The beginning of the riot at the Priyangshu organised rally which attempted to portray a secular image itself shows that superficial presentation of religious harmony with communal mind and intentions backfired. Moreover, the riot spread by the participants and use of derogatory songs against the Muslims indicate a rather well-planned move to further the communal sentiment in the region.

Riots in the coal belt

“Asansol has one of the finest beef bhuna to offer if you are willing to have it from some of the street side Muslim restaurants. You will encounter people coming down from the otherwise posh housing complexes to buy it so that it can become a good companion to their evening drinks. However, of late people are avoiding these Muslim Muhallahs.” – was a reflection of one of the Hindi-speaking young gentlemen buying a mutton roll from the same restaurant. It was 2019, only a year after the dreaded riot which tore apart the popular tagline attached with the city, that Asansol is the city of brotherhood. I was supposed to take a class at the Department of Psychology of the newly formed Kazi Nazrul University. I was accompanied by one of my friends from the department and we had plans to explore the street side foods and their varieties especially at the Muslim locale. We bought many items, tested much more and could feel the Asansol was recovering from the wound of the riot. People were rather open to speak up about the riots, blamed it on the coal mafia and political nexus but never blamed each other. Asansol and Raniganj have an informal coal-based economy running outside the purview of Eastern Coalfield Limited. They are connected with several illegal open coal mines here and there. Bombing, firing and blood shedding because of the conflict between different mafia gangs competing to gain control over the open mines are fairly common in the twin cities of Asansol and Raniganj. Their intricate nexus with the prevailing political equation is also quite well known. The coal mining-based cities like Asansol

and Raniganj of Paschim Bardhaman experienced a series of riots linked with the Ram Navami celebration. Like Bhatpara or Hajinagar, Asansol and Raniganj have unique demographic features. A substantive proportion of the people settled in both the cities are Hindi-speaking immigrants from north India. They have settled for generations from Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and a few from Rajasthan. As per the 2011 census, Asansol has 75.18% Hindus and 21.26% Muslims,⁸ and Raniganj has 76.86% Hindus and 21.92% Muslims.⁹ Both the cities have similar population composition and similar ghetto-formed settlements of Muslims. Many of them are Urdu speakers. Places like Rail par, Jhingri Muhalla, Kasai Muhalla, Jahangir Nagar, Azad Basti and Rahamat Nagar of Barnpur are some of the major Muslim settlements in the region. Their ghettoisation is quite conspicuous; their settlement pattern has rough similarity with what I have seen in the jute mill areas. Here too, the presence of *Bahubali* culture is quite prominent. The Hindi-speaking settlers from North India regularly attend Akhara for physical exercise. Since 2014, these Akharas are clearly getting attached to the RSS and Bajrang Dal. Since 2012–2013, there is a change in the nature and extent of celebration of Hanuman Jayanti and Ram Navami. Today almost every banyan tree of the city has a small but conspicuous Hanuman temple at its base. Hanuman has successfully replaced the traditional village deities like Kali, Chandi and Manasha. The colour of these sacred groves has transformed from inconspicuous dark red to conspicuous fluorescent yellowish saffron. “With the rise of RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and BJP, even smaller celebrations have become large and noisy” – as reflected by one of the age-old Hindu residents near the Rail par colony in 2019. In the 2014 Parliamentary election, Babul Supriyo, a veteran singer, won from Asansol constituency as a BJP’s candidate, which was quite instructive to the rise of Hindutva sentiments in the region.

In order to understand the 2018 riot, we need to look at another riot which took place in Pandabeswar, a block area that falls within the Asansol Assembly constituency in April 2017. Pandabeswar, like Asansol and Raniganj, has similar ghettoisation of Muslim villages like Dano, Sanapara, Hosen para and Mahal. Villages like Bohula, Baidyanathpur, Dalurbandh, Mahal, Nabagram and Chal Bakola are exclusively Hindu locales. Hindu-Muslim mixed villages are Jamaipara and Ruidas Para. In the 2011 census, Pandabeswar block has about 86.36% Hindus and 12.59% Muslims. None of the villagers could recall any communal tension before 2017. In several group discussions, villagers commonly expressed concern with the rising popularity of religious festivals like Hanuman Jayanti, Ram Navami and Dussera. Similarly, celebrations of Milad-un-Nabi, Fateha-i-Yajdaham, Muharram and Islamic Jalsha over the years have also become more popular.

As if there is a competition between the two communities to show who is more communal. Each of the different rallies becomes

platforms to display their community strength. It kept rising over the years. In 2017 Ram Navami Pandabeswar itself had about 15 to 20 thousand participants chanting “Jai Shree Ram” like war cry. They were carrying weapons like sword, trident, *Khanra* (traditional weapon used for animal sacrifice) and hundreds of wooden sticks.

[as told by Jayraj Paswan in a group discussion in November 2017]

People from across the political spectrum including the Left and TMC participated in the 2017 Ram Navami rally held on April 5. Hanuman flags were kept at every corner of Pandabeswar. The conflict started on April 7 as a few young students removed some of the flags because it created a problem in commuting through the crowded streets near the DVC bus stand. I have been told that the students belonged to the nearby Modern High School and one of them was a Muslim. Fake news ranging from Muslims taking out the Hindu flags to defaming Hindu gods and throwing beef towards the Pandabeswar temple was spread through social media. Similar rumours were spread among the Muslims that Hindus have brutally beaten up Muslim boys and that they have thrown pork in the village mosque. A large crowd assembled at Pandabeswar market which then targeted Mahal and Dano, two of the most conspicuous Muslim villages of the block. Angry mob put a blockade in different major crossings like Area more, Phulbagan more and Mahal More. Once the mob reached Dangal, they also received strong counter-action from the Muslims of the village. Several rounds of fire, bombing continued for hours and because of strong response, the crowd had to disperse. One of the Hindu participants, Ranbir Singh received a bullet injury. The dispersed Hindu crowd on their return had vandalised some of the shops owned by the Muslims. On several occasions during my fieldwork, I came to know that this riot was unexpected and manufactured by organisations like Bajrang Dal by tapping anti-TMC people who were already agitated to see the Muslims of the two villages getting a considerably good share of the illegal coal mining nearby. However, all these constructs kept floating while Pandabeswar saw the building up of a Ram Janki temple with active support from the TMC Mayor of Asansol Municipal Corporation Jitendra Tiwari, who in 2020 attempted to join BJP but cancelled at the last moment. Although this temple was popularly projected as an outcome of the joint effort by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, several Muslims rejected this claim and argued that this is another staged show to cover up what happened in Pandabeswar and Asansol in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Communal stage was already prepared for Asansol through the Pandabeswar riot in 2017. Bajrang Dal, VHP, RSS, BJP and Durga Shakti kept meeting at different temples for a bigger, better and well-prepared Ram Navami celebration in 2018. “They never expected such a strong Muslim resistance from the villages and desperately wanted to show their strength

through revenge. This time, they chose Asansol.” – reflected by one of the residents of Asansol. On March 15, 2018, the Ram Navami procession became extremely large and aggressive. Each of the participants carried one arm or the other. Jai Shree Ram war cry and provoking speech from the Durga Shakti members asking Hindu men to rise and protect the honour and dignity of the Hindu women from the “beard, fez wearing monsters” were all prominent features of the rally. The DJ song which instigated a riot in the Bhatpara-Kankinara area in 2018 was also played here. “It was a time for the evening prayer [Namaaz] and when the DJ song at full volume was being played some of the Muslims from the Rail par objected.” A riot started immediately. It began with stone pelting from the rally and from the Muslim locale to each other injuring many. The riot spread rapidly among the adjacent Hindu and Muslim colonies through stone pelting and hurling of crude bombs and petrol bombs. Several Hindu and Muslim shops and houses were set ablaze. Perhaps the most shocking outcome of this riot was the murder of a 17-year-old Muslim boy, son of the local Imam of the age-old Noorani mosque. The boy was studying at a local Madrasa when the riot started. He attempted to come back to his locality but was confused because of tear shells and ended up entering a Hindu locality. The riot could have worsened if the Imam Maulana Imdadullah Rashidi would not have intervened and stopped the angry Muslim mob who were preparing for a grand Janaza filled with hatred for the Hindus.

Several issues that fuelled the Hindu-Muslim polarisation in Asansol include not only the provocation from both the communities and development of religious organisations but also issues like installation of cow slaughter houses allegedly supported by the TMC MLA Malay Ghatak. While the problem was related to environmental degradation and the rise of pollution, it quickly turned into a communal one. There were not many slaughter houses in Asansol before, but since Yogi Adityanath government came and banned slaughter houses in Uttar Pradesh, several slaughter houses were installed near the Chandmari area. “Though this is a Muslim area, the foul smell created problems both for the Muslims and neighbouring Hindu locality of Kalyanpur. Malay Ghatak didn’t pay a heed to the problem unless it turned into a communal issue and he began to realise that TMC was losing ground. Even TMC workers started saying ‘Go and tell your didi [Mamata Banerjee] to offer Namaz, this cannot go on,’” said one of the Human Rights activists Suman Kalyan in a group discussion. The sharp division between haves and have-nots from the illegal coal mining, factionalism within TMC under the leadership of Jitendra Tiwari and Malay Ghatak, have all contributed significantly to the communalisation.

Asansol riot made it clear that the pro-Hindutva organisations were quite successful in translating cultural differences and local political economy into a communal one. The use of the same song in Asansol and Bhatpara indicates a strong and organised provocation to instigate riots in both places.

Even with the Hindu majority, Asansol riot was popularly projected as Muslim's over-reaction to a Hindu festival. It successfully reinforced a sentiment that Hindus are in danger under TMC's rule.

Social media-led riots in Baduria-Basirhat

Social media, especially the platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, has been used in each of the riots that took place in West Bengal either for organising the riot itself or for spreading rumours and fake information to consolidate Hindu-Muslim cleavage afterwards. Baduria Basirhat riot in 2017 is one of the most prominent examples where the riot begins with a Facebook post. Baduria block has a Muslim majority. They constitute 65.48% of the population and Hindus constitute about 34.35%,¹⁰ and similarly, Basirhat too has a Muslim majority with 68.54% and about 31.24% are Hindus.¹¹ The Facebook post was shared by a Hindu boy, Soubhik, about 17 years old on July 2. It was a Photoshop creation which showed that Allah and Nabi are involved in homosexuality on the roof of Kaaba Sharif. The post was shared many times and Muslim organisations found it extremely derogatory to Islam. The boy is a resident of Magurkhali village where July 2 was the day for *haat* – the weekly market. Consequently, both Hindus and Muslims in large numbers gathered for marketing. Some of the Muslims in the evening have vandalised Soubhik's house. Magurkhali is a Hindu-Muslim mixed village, and it has never seen any riot like inter-community conflict before. Some of his neighbouring Muslims have tried to save Soubhik's house but failed. In a group discussion, both the Hindus and the Muslims of Soubhik's village pointed towards the presence of outsiders. All of them had a beard and wore a fez when they vandalised the house. Several villagers reflected their fear from those outsiders. As the news spread, further Muslims in large numbers staged a protest by blocking important roads connecting Basirhat and Baduria. They demanded capital punishment for the boy. The boy was arrested immediately on the early morning of July 3, but hatred, road blockade, rail blockade continued. Several mosques in and around Baduria-Basirhat have declared oral fatwa and a large number of Muslims attempted to snatch him away from the police custody on their return from the district court. Like the Kaliachak incident (see Chapter 4), the Baduria police station was attacked and a couple of police vehicles were set ablaze. Places like Rudrapur and Kaosa, Muslim youths showed uncontrolled aggression and in my several interactions, I came to know that the middle-aged and old Muslims including some of the clerics ailed to control their behaviour. They continuously uttered slangs towards the Hindus and attempted to attack the Hindu locality. On July 3, the return Rath – *ultarath* in Bengali was celebrated. From such a procession in Barudia town, youngsters belonging to RSS and Bajrang Dal started sloganeering “Jai Shree Ram” and “All Hindus must unite” to further fuel the tension. Several large-scale organised

moves by Hindus and Muslims against each other at different locations in and around the twin towns of Baduria-Basirhat took place on the same day. It resulted in destruction of several houses belonging to both Hindus and Muslims. At Tentulia crossing of Swarupnagar, a mini-truck carrying a Hindu funeral procession was stopped by the protesting Muslims. It created a sense of hatred and outrage among the Hindus across the region. On the next day, i.e. on July 4, many of the mosques have reiterated their fatwa and Muslims organised a rally in Baduria carrying traditional Islamic flags. Because of rough resemblance, such flags were easily projected as Pakistani flag. Hindus in large numbers came out and an armed conflict between the two groups spread like a wild fire. Rapid Action Force (RAF) and later on Paramilitary forces were called for. On July 5, Tyantra and Tentulia became two major epicentres of violence. These are the two adjacent villages of Hindus and Muslims, respectively. A rumour was spread that Muslims are attacked by Hindus in Bara Masjid, Dewan Bagh Mazar and at Aminia Madrasa. A middle-aged Hindu businessman Mr. Kartik Mondal was killed by the Muslim rioters in Tentulia, which further intensified the violence. Even the RAF had to recede. A tear-shell hit one of the local Muslims who was taken to the hospital by Kartik Mondal's son in the same ambulance in which he took his dying father. It remains an example of Hindu-Muslim solidarity even today. In several subsequent interviews in September and October 2017, Kartik Mondal's son continued to repeat that "such violence between the two communities are unprecedented . . . a major cleavage of mistrust is now solidified." In a group discussion in November 2017, one of the villagers argued "because religious trainings supported by TMC and BJP are on the rise the youngsters are becoming violence prone . . . the outsiders can only launch an attack when there is some involvement from within the villages." While Basirhat town itself has a Hindu majority, the region as a whole has a Muslim majority. Both Islamic and Hindutva forces fuelled the conflict to continue for days. People belonging to both the communities reflected that while there were outsiders involved in riots, known faces were also involved in each of the organised attacks. During my fieldwork, I have encountered several villagers where Hindus and Muslims have tried and saved each other. Everywhere people reflected on the fact even though the violence was committed by unknown outsiders, a section of local people from neighbouring villages have accompanied them.

Of late social media and constructs equating Muslims with terrorism and Jihad like corona jihad and love jihad have made it relatively easier to fuel and create communal disturbances at such hotspots as jute mill adjacent places. We can see the continuation and ever-increasing communal clashes in places like Telinipara, Hooghly, where a Hindu-Muslim conflict took place out of the fake news that Muslims were intentionally spreading corona – a construct popularised when Tablighi Jamaat meet was identified as a corona superspreader. Telinipara is located at Chandannagar just opposite

to Bhatpara and falls within a communal hotspot as I have just mentioned. While Covid-19-led countrywide lockdown has resulted in massive migration of labourers, such labelling of Muslims became increasingly common throughout the state (Nath, 2020c). In a fact-finding report, Telinipara riot has been linked not only with such popular constructs spread through social media but also by repeated Facebook post by the BJP's Member of Parliament of that region Ms. Locket Chatterjee. She hinted towards the intentional lack of action from the police against the Muslims (AAMRA, 2020).

* * *

West Bengal over the years has developed what may be called riot hotspots at several locales. Riots in different scales in these areas have become a frequent phenomenon. The jute mill adjacent places are perhaps the most prominent among them. Apart from the fact that there is a rise in the fundamentalist groups and increasing marginalisation of secular-democratic forces, there is a kind of spontaneity among the common people to become a rioter. My intensive ethnographic study of the riots as has just been discussed reveals that at one end there is a degree of preparedness of both communities and at the other end there is a degree of involvement of common people. In every conversation I had in the riot-affected places, the initial response of the people was blaming outsiders. However, over time, during my repeated interviews and casual conversations, I came to know the extent of involvement of the local people and accumulation of communal sentiments within the locality. As you can see in Table 3.1, in Chapter 3, the state has continued to experience a number of communal conflicts which furthered the communalisation and consolidation of identities which is starkly different from the political spectrum especially during the LF regime. In each of the conflicts, names of different Hindutva and Islamic fundamentalist groups have surfaced.

Over the years of my association with riot-affected people within the regional contexts, I have been able to understand several broad structural parameters of the riots.

First, West Bengal has proliferation of organisations that works along the identity fault line. Partly because of the left legacy and partly because of the dominant focus on Hindutva forces the Islamic fundamentalism is either ignored as a relatively minuscule force or overemphasised by pro-Hindutva mainstream and social media. Consequently, the coeval nature of the identity consolidation is rather unknown both in academic discussions and in the mainstream political discourse.

Second and linked to the first issue is that the state has seen an unprecedented proliferation of identity sentiments of late. This is an outcome of the relentless effort made by these organisations

through a variety of means. It is important to understand that each of the riots has made the identity sentiment increasingly prominent and stronger. The sentiments like Hindus are in Danger, Muslims are overdoing things, Islam is intentionally defamed, Islam needs purification, etc., have been successful largely because of the fact that a sizable portion of the public sphere either are deprived or feel that they are deprived. The deprivation is rooted in several issues of everyday life, like the unemployment and loss of jobs in the jute mill areas, several corruption charges against the present regime (see, for example, Nath, 2017), factions within the power groups and increasing shrinking of democratic space and practices (Nath, 2020b). When seen in the context of these existential uncertainties, riots are the outcome of the fusion of an internalisation of three major radically opposing domains of insecurity and aggression. These are: a) identifying and blaming others for the existing misery, b) clinging to identity sentiments as a last resort for signifying one's own existence and c) searching for a shelter in the community sentiment through performance and practice.

Third, to identify and blame the other one also needs to define what constitutes the "us." Here, invented traditions have played a deciding role. Both Hindutva and Islamic traditions have attempted purification of their traditions. Hence, programmes like Ram Navami or for that matter aggressive Muharram has worked as a) a refuge to the people belonging to the same commune, b) a mechanism to further consolidate identity, c) a mechanism to define who is the other, d) a platform to display aggression towards the other and e) an avenue to perform what has been practiced for months through a variety of fitness training camps. These programmes have not only instigated riots but also attracted many followers to participate and identify with the "cause."

Fourth, there is a dimension of coordination between different organisations such as the pro-Hindutva wings that run Saraswati schools with celebration of festivals like Janmashtami where the students would participate in the dress like Shree Krishna competition or with the participation in Ram Navami rally. Similarly, unregistered Madrasas as an alternative to formal educational institutions, or the compulsions and social pressures created by organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami, IeS and Tablighi Jamaat for attending Namaaz prayers to follow Islamic rules work as a reserve force in the fundamentalist ideas. While the everyday functioning of these institutions along the communal line has made it easier for the organisations to expand their base, major political parties like BJP could find the pro-Hindutva organisations as their natural

alley. For TMC, it kept collaborating with most of the aggressive and puritarian Islamic organisations. They attempted to capitalise on their reach and impact. Both of these are different varieties of cultural misrecognition that earned them to translate communal sentiments into a popular electorate. What made the matter worse is that with the rise of BJP as an alternative force, identity-politics and party mobilisations started to work in collaboration with each other.

Fifth, local political economy, no matter how successfully concealed it is in terms of its involvement, does have a direct stake in the local conflicts. In each of the riots I have explored, I came across an involvement of local power groups that have utilised the outsiders. Such involvement of outsiders should be seen as a continuum in West Bengal violence. Elsewhere (Nath, 2020a, 2020b) I have shown the existence of armed hooligans and mercenaries (also known as the *Harmad Bahini* by media during the LF regime) who worked for different political parties before, during and after the election. Present riots show similarities in terms of nature and execution of the violence. The difference perhaps is the more conspicuous percolation of social cleavage beyond the political identity. Understandably, the political use of primordial identity is having a deeper and lasting effect on the social fault lines. Targeted loot and theft is not an indication of opportunism but a well-planned opportunism.

Finally, with each of the riots and rumours of riots, collective memory is formed. The formation, transportation, further accumulation and growth of memories of violence in the name of primordial identity are mostly done through social media. While the state in an attempt to stop further spread of violence and riot stops spreading the news of riot through mainstream media, social media is unstoppable and is strategically used both during and after the riot to keep the memory afresh. In each of the riots, there are instances of the spread of rumours and morphed photographs which only helped in the formation of an agitated public sphere and further riots.

The structural parameters as discussed earlier are derived inductively from my ethnographic experiences. These parameters are not unique to the state of West Bengal, when seen at a conceptual level, an even stronger dimension cultural misrecognition surfaces. The next chapter is an analytical take to map West Bengal in the broad spectrum of cultural misrecognition systematically used in the country, exemplified by incidents of lynching, Delhi riot and executed by identity-based organisations.

Notes

- 1 More or less similar nexus is also found in Asansol-Raniganj area which is linked with illegal coal mining.
- 2 I and my friend from AAMRA, Subhoptim Roy Chowdhury, were conducting the interview.
- 3 Mamata Banerjee was greeted with “Jai Shree Ram” at Bhatpara in May 2019. She reacted to it, and later on, seven people were arrested for chanting the slogan at Bhatpara. See www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mamata-banerjee-ram-slogan-de-tain-arrest-west-bengal-1539214-2019-05-31.
- 4 There were several media reports on how Arjun Singh has been attacked by TMC by using their party machinery and by using administration against him. The state has tried to arrest him, but he approached the Supreme Court of India who agreed to give him protection against arrest. He himself suffered from head injury which he alleged that TMC did. See www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/lok-sabha-election-2019-bjp-s-arjun-singh-alleges-attack-by-tri-namool-goondas-in-bengal-s-barrackpore/story-uTHKX4JsDSMJLvhkgoI0GL.html, www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/sc-agrees-to-hear-bjp-candidates-plea-seeking-protection-from-arrest/article27204444.ece, www.ndtv.com/india-news/shots-fired-near-bjp-lawmaker-arjun-singhs-house-in-bengals-bhatpara-2075459 and www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-bjp-mp-arjun-singh-sustains-head-injury-during-clash/story-CYKajJmcbbbsLWSnqfin2ML.html.
- 5 Indicating some kind of a labour-saving device which is installed in the recent past.
- 6 Madan Mitra, once Mamata Banerjee’s faithful minister, was sent to jail because of his alleged link with the fraudulent agency Sarada which made thousands of investors bankrupt. Wining Bhatapara MLA position would have earned his political credibility back.
- 7 This is in contrast to Dhulagarh, Baduria-Basirhat or Naihati-Hajinagar riots where shops and houses of both the Hindus and Muslims were looted.
- 8 www.census2011.co.in/census/city/200-asansol.html.
- 9 www.census2011.co.in/census/city/203-raniganj.html.
- 10 www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/c-01.html.
- 11 [https://web.archive.org/web/20160720152245/http://wbplan.gov.in/docs/Handbook_2004/24Pgs\(N\)2.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20160720152245/http://wbplan.gov.in/docs/Handbook_2004/24Pgs(N)2.pdf).

THE GRANDEUR OF CULTURAL MISRECOGNITION, INDIA MEETS BENGAL

As Bengal is witnessing a rise in the number of riots and an increased religious polarisation, the structural explanatory theories like “Party Society” by Bhattacharyya (2009, 2016) are facing a challenge. Before the 2021 Assembly election, such buzzwords as party society gained considerable prominence especially in the mainstream media and web platforms (Nath, 2021a). Popularising these terms has resulted in undermining the parameters like significance of certain key events, their designs, actors and mechanisms of execution. For example, while Chatterjee (2009) saw a very strong clientelistic politics and organisation effectiveness for the sustenance of Left in West Bengal, Harriss-White (2008) found oligopoly and clientelism in her field study. Both of them saw such clientelism and oligopoly connected with party machinery of the LF, especially the CPIM. The oligopoly that depended on the Left’s party society switched over their affiliation overnight as I have seen in my ethnographic fieldwork (Nath, 2021b). It clearly indicates that party machinery was not as powerful as it appeared. Party society as further explained by Bhattacharyya (2016) has several unique characteristics such as the (i) absence of other channels of public transactions, (ii) lack of political focus on caste, religion or ethnicity-based social divisions, (iii) partisan forms of conflicts, (iv) accepted position of party as “moral guardians” of social life and (v) party’s exclusive control over the panchayat system. If this happened to be in practice for at least three decades, then it is difficult to explain the sudden upsurge of communal sentiments, disappearance of the “party” and relatively easy navigation of governance using “cultural misrecognition” (see Chapter 2; Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming). TMC’s deliberate attempt to free the public sphere from the party grid has been quite successful, even within a few years of its rule first term (Nath, 2017). With TMC’s service delivery-oriented, charismatic leadership-based politics, Bengal is now well within post-party regime. If one looks at the entire country, use of cultural mechanisms, working on the existing social cleavage for gaining political support is quite prominent. While the previous chapters based on my ethnographic experiences give insights into the microdynamics of identity politics in Bengal, it is now important to see such

microcosm in a broad spectrum. Theoretically, while the structural theories often miss the rich ethnographic details in their attempt to create grand narratives, it is important to blend the structural theorisation and ethnographic details. It ensures an expansion of the ethnographically grounded concepts to study similar situations elsewhere.

The cultural sphere and politics of misrecognition in India

As the politics of misrecognition as an ethnographically grounded structural concept has already been elaborated in Chapter 2, here I will begin with a brief recall. I hope we remember that in a dominant party rule, such as the one experienced by West Bengal what appears as consent from the weaker section in Gramscian sense is actually a form of misrecognition, deeply engrained in everyday practice of the people.¹ Consequently, people subscribed to the politics of party system during the LF era to get many of the public services. In the recent past, their such “real interests” like getting the delivery of public services are often bypassed by formalising several hitherto ignored cultural traditions (Nath, 2018, 2020a). The question is: how unique is this form of governance mechanism or legitimisation strategy? How far can we use the concept of cultural misrecognition as a structural and conceptual category as we place West Bengal in India? Answering this question would require a closer look at some of the broad issues that formed the central axis of politics and governance of India.

A generic exploration of the narratives on which BJP came to power and still sustains its rule at the centre includes populism, (Hindu)nationalism, authoritarianism and majoritarianism. It has parallels to other parts of the world as well, most exclusively with the USA under Donald Trump. The legitimising mechanism of BJP’s rule in India ranges from the strategic usage of majoritarian sentiments through virtual networks of social media (Chaturvedi, 2019) to using horrific incidents like Pulwama blast to fuel hyper-nationalistic sentiments. In practice, we are witnessing a stronger mechanism of us/them binary. If Pulwama blast has renewed an anti-Pakistan (and hence anti-Islamic) sentiment to unite less of Indians but more of Hindutva sentiments, there are regular instances of fuelling existing Hindu/Muslim socio-cultural cleavages. When mapped together, all of these seemingly different incidents create a single thread of identity–politics interface. The mainstream BJP-leaning media houses have played a significant role in celebrating any of the policies taken up by the government. Clippings of such high-pitched praises are circulated over and again on different social media platforms to reinforce a particular form of trust on the government and the supreme leader.² The media mechanisms such as this add to the existing populism of the ruling regime and make a larger-than-life picture of the key leader, Mr. Modi. It ranges from an insane “56inch chest size,” saviour of Hindu and a visionary world leader. Mr. Modi, before becoming the

PM, constructed an image of a humble beginner. The political campaigning mechanism contrasted his humble beginning as a tea seller with the Gandhi dynast Mr. Rahul Gandhi. Blessed with an unparalleled orating skill, he could connect to the people.³ The authoritarianism started to surface with the use of Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) to silence the dissenting voices, including the students and journalists (Mir, 2020; Taskin, 2021). In people's everyday life, the usage of terms like Urban Naxal and *Tukde Tukde Gang* was made popular to demean even any slightest voices of dissent. These terms were made popular to ridicule political opponents mostly by using powerful social media. They became neologism trickled down through social media. Eventually the public sphere became divided between those who liked BJP and Modi and those who didn't. Much like medieval competing "tribes," people started to fight each other over a whole range of issues including the right and wrong of public policies to Hindu/Muslim divide. Meanwhile, demeaning terms were also coined against the BJP supporters like *Bhakts* (blind followers of Mr. Modi and BJP/RSS), and *Orange Chaddis* or *Chaddis* (meaning male undergarment – a coinage roughly originated from the fact that RSS cadres wore half pants for about 90 long years as their uniforms). However, partly because of BJP's continuous rising popularities and partly because of the massive IT-cell and media support the coinage against the opposition became much more popular. In West Bengal similar coinage is found, we have *Seku* – ridiculing the secular-minded people, *Maku* – ridiculing the Lefts – Marxists. They represent an everyday form of vigilantism and authoritarianism which is mostly indirect but extremely effective to polarise the public sphere. Categorisations, such as these mostly channelised through social media, help in sustaining a popular base of the political parties and consolidate the electorate. The more powerful a particular narrative becomes, it gets more attention from the so-called "non partisan" or "swing voters." Whether it is the issue of Ram Mandir, or labelling ridiculing the others there is a systematic development of two issues of majoritarianism that uses cultural misrecognition: first, the systematic demonisation and attack on minorities in the name of "cultural" difference and intolerance and second, creation of a utopic public imagination about a monolithic Hindutva that promises to "bring back golden past."

*Ethnic expendables and the grand Hindutva as mechanisms
of cultural misrecognition*

In the 2014 election campaign, Mr. Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, spoke only about development keeping aside his socialisation with RSS and training in Hindutva. Jaffrelot (2015, 2016) sees this as a political tactics, as Mr. Modi didn't really need to put emphasis on the pro-Hindutva ideology. He already has a special position in the heart of orthodox

Hindus. Rather the narratives of *Achhe din* – “good times ahead” and “Gujarat Model” without substance were used as a tool to capitalise on corruption charges against the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh as the PM. The infamous Gujarat riots during Mr. Modi’s Chief Ministership earned him an internationally negative image and equal publicity among the orthodox Hindus of the country. Among the official death toll, 790 were Muslims and 254 were Hindus. Gujarat resulted in refreshing memories of riots of the past and deepening of the Hindu–Muslim cleavage in the country (BBC, 2005). The broad sentiment of the 2002 riot was kept alive by subsequent riots in Orissa in 2007 and 2008 and Muzaffarnagar in 2013 where Muslims were mostly targeted (Chatterji, 2009). While scholars like Chatterjee et al. (2019) show that BJP installed a majoritarianism by placing a historically low percentage of Muslims as their Parliamentary candidates and zero Muslims among their Parliamentary members, Jaffrelot (2019, p. 41) through a study of the ethnicity-based representatives in the public services shows that there is enough reason to see India as “De facto ethnic democracy.” Furthermore, he shows how India has become a vigilant state. Clearly, since 2014, India has shown a distinct form of ethnic intolerance and a majoritarianism in every sphere. It is, however, important to note that India still has a relatively fair election process and a rather independent set of lawyers which push the judiciary to give “independent” verdicts. This is despite the fact that the government has often interfered in the appointment of judges. BJP attempts to build deeper and far-reaching majoritarian sentiment on two major pillars: first, constant demonisation of the “others” – primarily the Muslims and Dalits and second, popularisation of invented traditions (see Chapter 5, for West Bengal) and materialising the long-drawn dream of Hindutva – the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Both of these work as cultural misrecognitions in terms of diverting people’s attention from some of the development narratives that earned BJP an unprecedented popularity in 2014 and also in 2019.

While Bengal has seen the rise in riots as mechanisms to polarise the public sphere, India since 2014 has shown a different mode of polarisation – mob lynching along the lines of identity. India has several cases of mob violence over issues like alleged child trafficking, theft and witchcraft. Cattle-linked lynching by gang of *Gaurakshak*⁴ – cow vigilante or cow militia – is relatively recent in origin. Salam (2019) shows that since 2010, there are 86 clear cases of cattle-linked lynching and about 98% of them are reported after May 2014. He further shows that about 88% of the people killed in these incidents were Muslims.

Most of us became aware of the lynching with the case of a 52-year-old Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh. He was lynched because the Gaurakshaks believed he killed a calf and kept beef in his refrigerator on September 29, 2015. Direct support was extended to the perpetrators by

the BJP as a former BJP MLA blamed the victim's family "if they have consumed beef, they are also responsible." The police had sent the meat sample for testing which also in a sense reduced the crime of killing to keeping beef in a refrigerator (*Indian Express*, 2015). Cow vigilante-led lynching became a new normal and stopped making big headlines in the newspapers as more incidents started to appear (Salam, 2019). By April 2017, an Islamic beard face was enough to get killed while carrying a cow even with a purchase document. Pehlu Khan was killed by Gaurakshaks in Alwar, Rajasthan. Even with a document of purchase, the Gaurakshaks robbed them and beat up Pehlu Khan so that he died a couple of days later. Local administration in a shocking move filed a First Information Report (FIR) against Pehlu Khan under the Rajasthan Bovine Animal (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Act, 1995 (Krishnan, 2017). The names he mentioned in his dying statement belonged to the VHP and Bajrang Dal. The accused were "Not Questioned, and 'Not Guilty'" as *Indian Express* (2017a) reports. The administrative action only brings more suspicion as in July 2018 Rakbar Khan was lynched. Police recovered him unconscious and instead of going to the hospital spent hours in the police station; consequently, he was brought dead in the Community Health Centre about three hours later. It is only nearly three kilometres away. The NDTV (2018) reports that Rakbar Khan was given a bath as he was mud soaked; police arranged for the cows to be sheltered, then drank tea from a tea stall and went to the police station. Finally, after four hours, he was brought dead to the health centre. A person alleged that police even abused heavily injured Rakbar inside the police vehicle to know if he was still alive. Later investigation revealed that Rakbar was lynched to death (or died because of police negligence) on the basis of the mere assumption that he was a cow smuggler and not a milkman (Jain, 2018). There were cases of lynching in Chittorgarh in 2016. One of those was surfaced on social media. The lynching of cow transporters in that case was done in front of police. The lynching was video tapped and circulated via social media. It became a regular practice of the perpetrators since then.⁵ Perhaps one of the most shocking of these videos was the murder of Afrazul on December 6, 2017, a migrant labourer from Maldah, West Bengal in Rajsamand, Rajasthan. Shambhulal Regar took him to offer some work, hacked, beheaded, set fire to and killed Afrazul. He made his 14-year-old nephew shoot everything on a mobile phone which was then uploaded online. He continued to utter anti-Muslim words. This incident was given a love jihad angle that only stereotypes and demonises the Muslim men (Salam, 2020).⁶ His actions stirred Hindutva sentiments so that in a campaign supporting Sambhulal, more than 500 people donated and within few days more than 3 lakhs rupees was collected for his family (The Print, 2017). A big rally came out in support of Sambhulal in Udaypur (NDTV, 2017). The "infection" of lynching didn't spare under-age neither did it care for the place. The 15-year-old Junaid was

stabbed in Delhi Mathura train merely because he was a Muslim and had a quarrel in a crowded train. Words like “anti-national” and “beef eater” were repeatedly used while the attack was going on and it was probably one of the reasons that the rest of the crowd continued to remain mere spectators (Indian Express, 2017b).

The number of cow-linked lynching has reduced of late only to give rise to large-scale riots in places like Delhi; I will discuss more about it later. A careful study of the lynching incidents indicates certain commonalities:

- a Unproven allegations and organised move;
- b Administrative inaction;
- c Legitimisation through celebration and hero worship of killers and political ignorance.

The lynching starts with an unproven allegation of cattle slaughter or possible cattle slaughter. Sometimes evidence of meat, or a carcass and sometimes no evidence is needed to gain public sentiment for a brutal murder. The brutality of Akhlaq’s case as described by Salam (2019) explains the deep-rooted interfaith hatred and intolerance and how it is rising over the years. While it is commonly held that the lynching started in the name of cow protection, evidence, such as the lynching of Mohsin Shaikh, a techie, in Pune in June 2014 indicates a much deep-rooted intolerance. In this particular case, an **ambiance** of hatred was created previously as there was news of circulation of morphed photographs of the historical character Shivaji and Shiv Sena founder Bal Thakrey through proxy servers (Outlook, 2014). Mohsin was killed because of his Islamic beard. Members of Hindu Rashtra Sena – a pro-Hindutva organisation – were arrested (Byatnal, 2014/2016). Both in the case of cow-linked lynchings and in social media-led lynching, organised move and unproven allegations are notable. Cow-protecting forces in North and Western India, the Hindu Rashtra Sena of Pune or the ways in which Bajrang Dal, Durga Shakti has organised Ram Navami, or participated in the riots in Bengal are comparable. Such organisations working along the line of Hindutva ideology set by Golwalkar (1939) indicate a nation-wide existence of a network for further polarisation of the public sphere.⁷

Administrative inaction is notable in most of the cases of lynching. As was the case of Pehlu Khan, there are many other instances where police without conducting even preliminary investigation brought the case of cow smuggling against the victim. An international collective of 11 organisations, including Alliance for Justice and Accountability, New York, Citizens for Justice and Peace,

Mumbai, Jamia Teachers' Solidarity Association, New Delhi, and Rihai Manch, Lucknow, through an investigative study shows that Jharkhand police was "sabotaging" an open and shut case of murder of the two cattle traders, Mazloom Ansari and Imtiaz Khan, in March 2016 (National Herald, 2018). Similar incidence of lodging FIR against the victims Siraj and Shakeel under relevant sections of Madhya Pradesh's anti-cow-slaughter law is reported in Satna (Ghatwai, 2018). A study conducted by Indiaspend team in collaboration with FactChecker.in reveals that one in every three police personnel in India believes that it is natural to a large extent for mobs to "punish" the culprits when there is a cow slaughter. They have created a rank of 21 states according to police perception of lynching in which Jharkhand tops and West Bengal is at the bottom. It is seen that 28% of 133 cow slaughter-related deaths police filed a complaint against the victims (Indiaspend, 2019).

One of Akhlaq's murder accused Ravin Sisodia died inside the jail and his body was draped with the national flag giving him a martyr status. India Today (2016b) reports members of local Hindutva organisations and VHP addressed the gathering of 1,000 people in the village. Similarly as already discussed Sambhulal Regar the murderer of Afrazul – a migrant labourer – was not only given whole hearted support and a crowd funding for his family but was also offered a Parliamentary ticket for contesting from Agra by Uttar Pradesh's Navnirman Sena (The Times of India, 2019). Hindustan Times (2018) reports along with a photograph in which he was found sitting with a pickaxe on a decorated tableau in a Ram Navami procession in Jodhpur. Incidents such as these give a sanction to hate crimes and definitely encourage many to take up similar actions in the name of hatred, religion and heroism. Such sanctioning and legitimisation get an informal nod from the political players when they remain silent and do not recognise something wrong in the series of lynching.

As glorification of murders kept continuing, police and administration too found such killings as a natural and spontaneous outburst of popular sentiments. Silence from key politicians in this regard is questionable. While the PM condemned the attack on Dalits as early as 2016, his silence on the issues of Muslims is notable (Business Standard, 2016). He took almost a couple of years more to speak against lynching of the Muslims. On June 29, 2017, he broke his silence on the issue. During the inauguration of the Sabarmati Centenary celebrations, Gujarat, he said: "Today I want to say a few words and express sadness on some of the things going on. We are a land of non violence. We are the land of

Mahatma Gandhi. Why do we forget that? No one spoke about protecting cows more than Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinoba Bhave. Yes. It should be done. But, killing people in the name of Gau Bhakti is not acceptable. This is not something Mahatma Gandhi would approve. As a society, there is no place for violence” (The Wire, 2017a). This statement needs to be seen in the context of the nationwide protest against the mob-lynching with #NotIn-MyName which was not restricted to social media only but people took up streets everywhere (The Wire, 2017b, EPW, 2018). It was the citizen’s move that silence indicating indirect indulgence was somewhat stage-managed by giving such statements as mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, the monk turned politician Yogi Adityanath gives the issue of mob lynching an “a mountain out of a mole hill” argument. He furthered the argument as it was responsibility of every individual, every community and every religion to respect each other’s sentiments. . . . Humans are important as are cows as both have their own roles in nature. Everyone should be protected.

(Business Standard, 2018)

The frequency of lynching reports started to fall partly because of widespread protests and partly because of Covid-19-led lockdown since 2020. A widespread riot in Delhi in February 2020 that started from the anti-CAA protesting site at Shaheen Bagh area took India back to the rioting mode. Although there are multiple accounts including the mutual blame game by the Hindus and Muslims, two things remain clear: a) the ultimatum given by BJP leader Kapil Mishra on February 23 was one of the major triggering factors followed by widespread riots (The Wire, 2020) and b) the role of police under the union home ministry is questionable and there are several reports stating that police attacked the Muslims along with the rioters (The New York Times, 2020; The Guardian, 2020).

Throughout these years, India has witnessed several radically different scenarios. If for lynching issues it was the deafening silence of the key political leaders, for the Delhi riot, India was celebrating Donald Trump’s visit. Similarly, during the pandemic-stricken unprecedented suffering of migrant labourers, India witnessed a grand celebration of the laying of the foundation silver brick by PM Modi himself.⁸ The gloss and spectacle added to the ceremonial initiation of a “golden chapter” of Hindutva in India was also an attempt to legitimise BJP’s rule (Hindustan Times, 2020). It was also an attempt to wipe off the darkness in organised move to demolish Babri Masjid in 1992.

What we see on the surface in terms of the lynching issues, or the spectacular celebration of laying of foundation brick to Ram temple and politics of polarisation are parts of the grand design of cultural misrecognition. It

is a deliberate attempt to keep the public sphere busy fighting each other. Consequently, issues like India's worst performance in the economic sphere especially in increasing fall of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its triggering effects such as slowdown of job growth and uncontrolled price rise are overlooked. While the Covid-19 led to an unprecedented disastrous performance of the economics of the country, a quick glance on the parameters such as GDP of the pre-Covid period shows that India already had a bad performing economy. GDP fell from 8.26% in 2016 to 5.02% in 2019.⁹ Some of the famous economists blame this fall partly on the demonetisation in 2016 and partly because of the unrest within the country. The concealment of failures in delivery of public services through cultural misrecognition entails several characteristics:

- 1 Creation of an image of glorious past which is mythical but is made appear as achievable under a particular form of leadership.
- 2 Creation of a dominant narrative along the identity line. Funding and making them spectacular and entangle them in people's everyday life to create a misrecognition base through *habitus* which is not only a consent base. Ram Navami rallies or the spectacular Ram Temple foundation ceremony exemplifies such grand narratives. While at micro level there are several events as discussed in previous chapters.
- 3 Formation and consolidation of us/them dichotomy. Making violence appear as a spontaneous "cultural" expression and not as a crime. This enables popular support and imitation of hate crimes at other places. These are no longer crimes but are performances.
- 4 Invest in organising fairs, festivals to conceal issues like depressing performance in the delivery of public services and economic slowdown. Organising Kumbha Mela despite Covid-19 pandemic exemplifies this trend.
- 5 Do not let economic issues dominate the public discourses. If the opposition or other competing political forces including civil society attempt to work on these issues ridicule them. Ridiculing them entailed a creative use of neologisms such as Urban Naxal and Tukde Tukde gang.
- 6 Use an aggressive form of nationalism along the line of primordial identity such as connecting Ram Temple issue with the sentiment of the nation and label dissenting voices as anti-national.
- 7 Use every possible form of media to create and sustain the narrative of your choice. It ranges from making a visual appearance at street-side hoardings, on TV commercials, social media, and holograms, and in the public services delivery schemes. The choice of colours and use of symbols in those images are often hints towards a particular form of identity inclination. Hence, for Modi, it is inevitably the saffron, and whenever needed carrying other Hindutva markers, for Mamata, it is often the Hijab-clad appearance or uttering a Hindu popular *mantra* in a public

rally. Whenever, possible tapping of popular ideologue or traditional cultural icons as exemplified by Modi's attempt to use Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda in election rallies.

- 8 Use every means to legitimise "cultural" often superstitious beliefs as instruments for betterment substituting scientific-administrative ones. Hence, there is a proliferation of unscientific and unfounded statements and an obsession with cow urine and cow dung as cure to ailments. In Bengal, the BJP state president openly stated about the golden colour of the milk of a local breed of cow representing gold in it.¹⁰ As scientific-minded people might have found these statements as absurd and entertaining, such statements from the people with authority serve the purpose of legitimising culture and tradition substituting rational and scientific. In a sense, they legitimise the cow protectors and elimination of the "others" who have the potential to eat them.

Figure 7.1 is a schematic description of the mechanisms of cultural misrecognition.

Channelisation of cultural misrecognition India faces Bengal

Cultural misrecognition is the new structural state apparatus in operation for at least a decade now. Delhi riots, post-election violence in West Bengal and in both cases, election defeat of BJP show a new political direction in the making. First, these defeats show that service delivery pays, and second, it is important to understand that polarisation does not always give an electoral dividend. While Aam Aadmi Party capitalised on the delivery of public services in their last tenure, TMC in West Bengal altered their narrative from identity polarisation issues towards service delivery issues by launching schemes for universal health insurance and delivery at doorstep – *duare sarkar*. There are certain commonalities between the riots and lynching which connects the sentiments of different places together.

A The construction of others

It is seen that similar "successful" mechanisms are used in constructing the "us/them" boundary. It is partly based on the primordial identity sentiments stemmed from "different" cultural practices and partition memory and partly based on newly founded hoaxes like Hindus are in Danger in "Hindurashtra," Ghushethiya (Infiltrators), Job eaters and illegitimate occupants (person who is not supposed to live here, because of some weird reason ranging from having a skull-cap to participating in particular rallies). Because a section of public intellectuals have actually opposed such constructs and raised their voices for the expendable "others," they are also

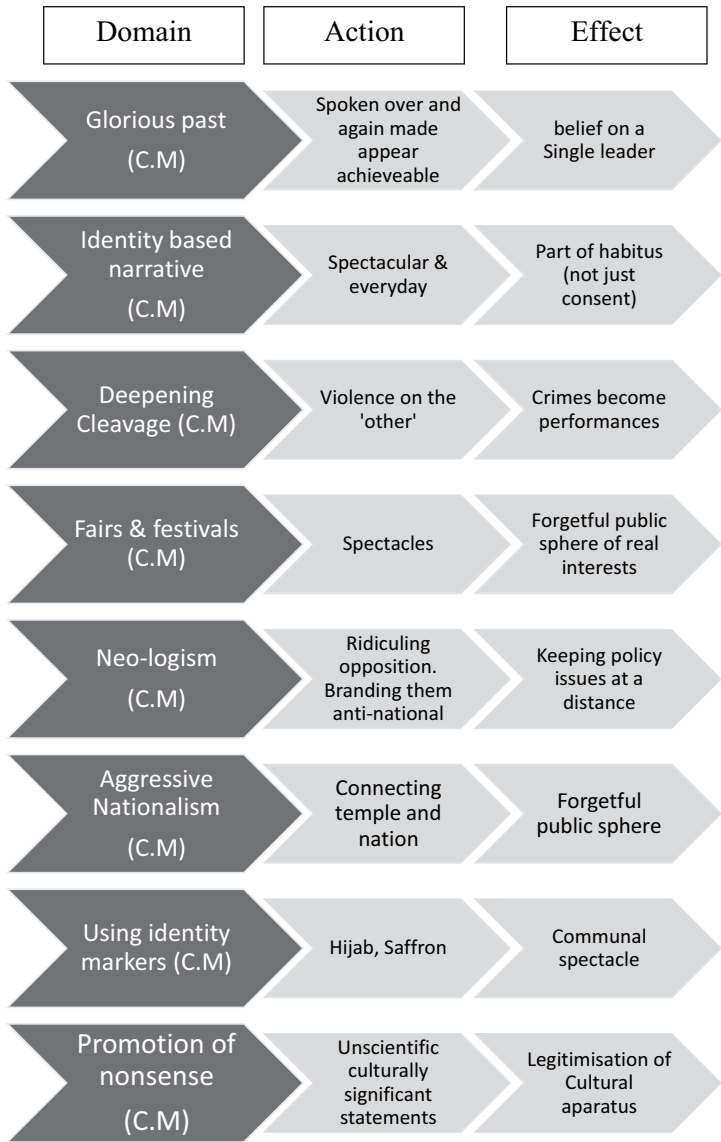


Figure 7.1 Domains of cultural misrecognition and its effect on the public sphere (C.M represents Cultural Misrecognition)

Source: author’s own

branded as others with innovative connotations like “urban naxal,” “anti-nationals” and the like. Once such connotation/category is widely popularised, it becomes a portable tool to identify a wide section of the populace to be confronted with. So, now one group has a handy device to construct the category “other” through the degree or extent of their otherness and then based on the available resources they can decide what can be done on the other. Such actions range from online bullying to murder and from lynching to riot.

B Resources

There is an attempt to project riots in West Bengal as *spontaneous* outcome of the hatred (Dhulagarh), religious procession (Asansol, Naihati-Hajinagar), or viral Facebook post (Baduria-Basirhat). However, in each of the interviews (see Chapter 6), people commonly expressed that there were “outsiders” partnering with “insiders” to work as perpetrators of violence. While the outsiders are the organised forces that successfully conduct the riots in Bengal and lynching in other places, insiders are the ones who connect personal and communal hatred and channelise them. People in India have internalised the Hindu/Muslim divide since the formation of the country, which gets manifested each time we had an India–Pakistan cricket match or the two countries go to war. Organised move and mobilisation of everyday weapons like *Khanra* – specialised Hindu axe for animal sacrifice, *Chapati* – Islamic knife for sacrifice, sticks, crude bombs and also specialised country made pistols as found in Delhi riot indicate a considerable accumulation of weaponry by the people perpetrating in violence.

C Aggressive hate speech

Aggressive hate speeches such as the one used by Kapil Mishra before the Delhi riot are not an isolated incident. Hate speech has an extremely important role to nurture a mutual hatred and everyday form of violence (Nath, 2020b). Islamic Jalsha and temple microphones are regularly used in delivering hate speech against people belonging to different religions. The same is found during the Ram Navami rallies or pilgrim movements towards Islamic places like Furfura Sharif. In each of the riots in West Bengal, there is a significant presence of hate speech delivered by people occupying the positions of power. In Baduria-Basirhat, there were instances of hate speech delivery by locally influential leaders. People alleged a cross-border influence, as they have heard that hate speech from mosques located on the other side of the border in Bangladesh. Similarly, in Rejinagar, Murshidabad, the attack on Pir panths by the Sharia panths was organised and channelised by the local mosques through hate speech. Apart from that, the rallies, filled with competing politico-communal forces, are always mutually exclusive

and echoed with hate speech. These are often resulted in violence, like what has happened in Asansol-Ranigunj and the dynamics of Ram Navami-led conflicts in different places of the state.

D The creation of culturally sensitive geography

There is a geographic feature of the Delhi violence. It is roughly parallel to what happened in many places in West Bengal in the recent past. Delhi violence has a connection with the borders of Uttar Pradesh and has taken place in the pockets where BJP has the majority. Similarly, in West Bengal too, there are specific areas that are made culturally sensitive ones, for example, in Naihati-Hajinagar which is, as one local teacher mentioned, a “mini-India” because of its population dynamics. With the jute mill concentration, these are the places where people from all over India have immigrated and eventually settled down. The same is the case with Asansol or for that matter in Kankinara-Bhatpara where the politico-religious conflict continued for months before, during and after the Parliamentary election. Once one reaches these places, s/he can easily see the compressed co-existence of Hindu–Muslim. Their extremely inhuman condition of living, unemployment and defunct status of the jute mills have made it easier for becoming a communal breeding ground. The community toilet doesn’t have privacy and people are supposed to excrete openly in a confined place. The community bathing system reminds us of a concentration camp and filthy drainage makes us nauseous. Yet, instead of raising voices against such inhuman condition of living people blinded with interfaith intolerance keep on fighting an impossible Hindu–Muslim battle. The communal upsurge in Delhi has also happened at places that roughly correspond to the geography in Bengal where construction of identity fault line is relatively easier.

At these places in Bengal, there is a sudden upsurge of “invented traditions.” The examples include Ganga Aarati on a smaller scale and Ram Navami rallies on a larger scale. Numerous temple-based organisations, working in synchronisation with these events, have formed a living display of political use of religion. They have brought back the identity issues in public discourse. Such pockets as Naihati-Hajinagar, Chandannagore, Telinipara Dhulagarh and Baduria-Basirhat reflect on the manufacturing of polarisation and continuation of a cultural hypersensitive geography.

Apart from the four major structural similarities between West Bengal and the rest of the country, include the administrative inaction and questionable role of the media (see Chapters 4–6 for detailed discussion).

* * *

West Bengal has definitely felt the identity tremor along with the rest of the country. The ideological mechanism and organisational hard work have earned both Islamic and Hindutva organisations a space in the state. Clearly,

the more majoritarian sentiments proliferate in the country at large; the minority groups too will open up their claws and tentacles. A walk through some of the popular streetside beef-selling restaurants in Kolkata today would reveal a sudden change. You will see some of them have declared “No Beef” as a statement in front of their shops at places like Mirza Galib Street, Kolkata. They are indicative of certain fundamental changes in the state despite the fact that TMC won a landslide victory. As Dhawan (2018) writes “Fear and alienation is changing the way middle-class Muslims live, from what they pack for lunch to how they’re naming babies,” West Bengal too is going through a tremendous transformation and as I have shown in previous chapters this is a two-way transformation.

As West Bengal was heading towards the assembly election in 2021, especially after the 2019 Parliamentary election, the ruling TMC took a radically different pathway to tackle the rising identity sentiments in politics. They have successfully reverted back the narrative from the identity fault line to service delivery, something that earned them a massive second term in 2016 (Ray, 2017; Nath, 2017, 2018, 2020a). The question of identity that had disturbed the public sphere in most part of the TMC’s second term was given an answer through popular, quick and tangible benefiting schemes like scholarships to the students, universal health scheme, grievance redressal, of late the students’ credit card and quickening of the delivery of services. Finally, a new narrative of outside/inside was launched in the popular slogan “Bangla Nijer Meyekei Chay” – Bengal wants her own daughter with Mamata Banerjee’s photo. The divisive identity fault line that was so strongly manufactured through mutual hatred found a new channelising mechanism – the regional sentiment. This is a completely different narrative set by using a liberal and regional cultural twist. Meanwhile, the vibrant civil society of West Bengal started a strong movement against polarisation politics. The civil society movement such as #NoVotetoBJP has worked silently, cross-cutting ethnic and political boundaries to reach even remote villages. Different civil society organisations, theatre groups and little magazine conglomerates aided by teachers, scholars and students this particular campaign had a wide appeal on a large section of Bengali people in the state (Ghosh, 2021). In an interactive session organised by Mumbai-based Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, an important organiser of the campaign Mr. Mohit Ranadip said that using the existing civil society networks, they could tap important non-party left intellectuals to work for the cause. There were loosely connected district- and region-level organisers who often singlehandedly spread “the dangers of voting for a regime that works along the line of identity issues . . . we have never told whom to vote for, but told whom not to vote for!” He also revealed that the party-left – most conspicuously, the CPIM tried to stop this campaign as they labelled this to be a TMC-organised campaign. However, he reiterated “we have said not to vote for BJP, people found TMC to be a credible alternative and

not the CPIM or the left!” Despite TMC’s desperate attempt to wipe off the alleged Muslim appeasement tag from their political practices, West Bengal continues to be communally sensitive. Places like Telinipara and Bhatpara and new places like Shantipur are adding to the existing map of riots. While it is interesting to note that TMC could win over with a great margin, it is equally important to note that celebrated Bengal exceptionalism is no longer as invincible as it was during the left era. Rather, we have seen that BJP with clear Hindutva agenda could climb up from 3 seats to 77 within a five-year span and a completely new party Indian Secular Front which has an Islamic outfit won a seat in the assembly.¹¹ The traditional secular forces like the Left and Congress for the first time in decades are out of the Assembly. Bengal is carrying the major potential for competitive communalism much like the rest of the country.

Notes

- 1 In my previous book published in 2020, and *EPW* articles in 2018 and forthcoming, I have conceptualised two ontologically different forms of misrecognitions in West Bengal. During the LF, it was systemic misrecognition channelized by party machinery and during TMC’s time the primary mechanism has been the use of traditional cultural expressions (see Nath, 2018, 2020a, forthcoming).
- 2 For example, after the demonetisation effort, Zee News spread a purposeful fake information about a GPS tracking nano chip being installed within the new Rs. 2000 notes. The decision that was criticised by most of the celebrated economists around the world was made appear as a masterstroke of the Prime Minister Mr. Modi. For weeks, such praises continued in support of the ruling regime.
- 3 There has been a few scholarly works on Modi’s popularity and the one by Jafrelot and Tillin (2017); one can read on this regard.
- 4 Gaurakshaks range from well-organized group of self-proclaimed cow protectors to loosely formed protecting groups which is aimed at saving the Hindutva ideology of Gaumata the mother cow from being slaughtered by Muslims. The protecting movement is as old as 150 years and has been one of the prominent points of disagreements between the Hindus and Muslims which has often resulted in riots (Dharmpal and Mukundan, 2002; Mukul, 2015).
- 5 Social media has been used to circulate such videos and photos. This particular incident barely got media coverage excepting by *The Milli Gazette* which mostly caters the Muslim audience (see www.milligazette.com/news/14369-in-the-name-of-cow-protection-goons-strip-and-brutally-beat-muslims-traders). If you are interested to know how communalized the country has become, you got to visit their Facebook page where they have posted the report along with photos and read the comments (click here www.facebook.com/milligazette/posts/1272299602787687).
- 6 Love Jihad is a concept promoted by the Hindutva organisations including BJP. It means that Muslims in India are marrying Hindu women to make Hindus a minority “race” of the country. There are several instances where RSS’s youth wings like Bajrang Dal and the infamous anti-Romeo squad in Uttar Pradesh have beaten up Muslim men who married or fell in love with Hindu women despite the Special Marriage Act provision which allows any couple of legal age to marry a person of his/her choice. Interested person can read a *Frontline* issue on Love Jihad which was published on December 18, 2020.

- 7 Golwalkar (1939) suggested that India should be a Hindu Rashtra where other “races” must be subordinated. Either they have to leave the country or have to merge with the majority “race.” The others as he refers to Muslims and Christians must be wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation without even a citizen’s right.
- 8 For an understanding of the Ayodhya verdict, one can go through this link <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ayodhya-verdict-live-updates-supreme-court-verdict-on-ram-mandir-babri-masjid-dispute/liveblog/71978224.cms>.
- 9 One can see the entire data on GDP growth by following this website www.macrotrends.net/countries/IND/india/gdp-growth-rate.
- 10 He furthered the argument stating that Indian cows have a hump where there is a special nerve. When sunlight falls on it, gold is created! He argued that this country breed is the cow-mother or Gaumata and the foreign breed is Aunty! For details, follow this link: www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cow-s-milk-contains-gold-dilip-ghosh/story-62nMe6RBqW6QRrwDnKyQfj.html.
- 11 Although the Indian Secular Front has nominated their candidates from different sections of the society, it was the Islamic Pir Abbas Siddiqui who became face of the front. Abbas Siddiqui has been organising Islamic Jalsa and declaring oral Fatwa against the people who do not lead their life according to Sharia rule. The Brigade meeting organised by the coalition of the Left, Congress and Secular Front has seen an unprecedented support for Abbas and not for anyone else. This coalition after election looks weak and unlikely to survive.

CONCLUSIONS

Communalism: percolating in Bengal everyday life

In 2021, as West Bengal was heading towards a political confrontation of the two major forces in the state, there was increasing communalisation of the public sphere. Although the ruling TMC, about a year before the election went back to embrace the service delivery-oriented politics, the communal sentiment was still quite dominating in the state. As Figure 3.2, Chapter 3 shows, BJP being the nearest opposition to TMC, both TMC and BJP have tried their best to translate the cultural misrecognition defined politics into vote. While for BJP it was the Hindutva, and anti-Islamic propaganda, for TMC, it was the regional sentiment of Bengali culture versus the labelling of BJP as outsider dynamics. Interestingly, the more election dates were approaching TMC increasingly created a distance from the communal issues and concentrated more on the service delivery-oriented politics which was their main political discourse in their first term in 2011. Social and a prominent section of the mainstream media are working together to create aggressive forms of Hindu–Muslim divide and a fragile, hypersensitive ethnic sentiment. For example, in a popular television debate held on January 13, 2021 a Bengali actress Sayani Ghosh stated that Jai Shree Ram is used as a war cry which is not only alien to Bengali culture but also divisive. She was targeted by none other than the senior BJP leader Tathagata Roy, former governor of Tripura on Twitter. Tweet and response from Sayani Ghosh went quite far and Tathagata Roy lodged a police complaint with reference to Sayani Ghosh’s old tweet in which the popular HIV-AIDS awareness cartoon character Bula di is shown as making a Shiva Linga wear a condom. It was posted in 2015. Ms. Ghosh later fought election under TMC’s candidature and got defeated by BJP. Another actress Debolina Dutta in a news channel debate said that she can go and cook beef on Durgapuja Navami at Aninda Chattopadhyay’s house. Aninda Chattopadhyay is the lead singer of popular Bangla Band Chandrabindu and has been successful with his film direction in the recent past. She said this by taking reference from him as he emphatically said that political parties should not sneak around people’s refrigerators. Debolina Dutta started to get rape threats from the Hindutva IT brigade. They didn’t even spare her mother from saying such hate-filled

words. As the Asansol BJP MP Babul Supriyo once said that he has had beef during his college life and never got any reaction from the Hindutva brigade, it was only natural for Debolina Dutta to see it as an attack not only on her freedom of speech but also on her gender identity of being a woman. BJP state leadership, including the state president Dilip Ghosh, has time and again defamed respected public intellectuals and Noble Prize winners like Prof. Amartya Sen and Prof. Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee at the personal level. Political discourses which revolve around beef-pork debate and Ram Navami, defaming public intellectuals or undermining the reformers and vandalising their statues together form a grand narrative of hatred and cultural misrecognition.

How will West Bengal respond to the ever-increasing number of violence, threat of violence and rising intolerance between two major faiths and how will it impact the political orientation of the state are highly unpredictable. Even after a heavy election defeat to the BJP in 2021, it is notable to see that the assembly of the state will now have government and opposition, both of whom use cultural and religious apparatus in their politics and governance. It is becoming increasingly clear that such divisive politics have resulted in percolation of hatred in everyday life. Given the fact that cultural misrecognition as a dominant mode of politics is engulfing every other relatively secular forms of public transactions like party organisations, it is relatively clear that West Bengal is heading towards more violence prone and religious polarisation in near future. At an ideological level, this is increasingly becoming a battle between the RSS and the Islamic forces along with their political allies. RSS's age-old agenda set in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar which attempts uniting the entire Hindu society from Kanyakumari to the Himalayas while excluding minorities, especially the Muslims, is in a process of implementation (Seshadri, 1981). We can recall Golwalkar (1939), who offers two options to Muslims and Christians either to merge with the majority "race" or to live at its mercy and quit the country whenever they are asked to. Their fight against India's secular foundation was of building up the Hindu nation from below with installation of traditional rites and practices through social work and the use of violence (Golwalkar, 1939; Jaffrelot, 1996, 2009a, 2009b). Hedgewar's grassroots mobilisation through *Shakha* technique is being used at the organisation level to coordinate the efforts of manufacturing polarisation in the state. This ideological battle at the grassroots is fought by using a particular mode of vigilantism, especially after 2014. There is a convergence of interests between RSS and the political front of Hindutva, the BJP. Therefore, where BJP is in power, they have encouraged moral policing. For example, in the cow-linked lynching of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh where BJP is in power, the government maintained its "sanctity" or at least apparently remained clean but encouraged cultural policing of society. Such policing is in tune with its ideology, while, on the other hand, the pro-Hindutva organisations, especially the Sangh

Parivar, could resort to its favourite *modus operandi* for disciplining society, at the grassroots level, without fearing state intervention. Hence, the cow vigilantes' killing of Muslims just because of their religious identity (see Salam, 2019 for details), several riots in West Bengal, invented traditions like Ram Navami, aggressive Islamic celebration of different festivals, creating rumours like Corona Jihad, Love Jihad and then formulating Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020 in Uttar Pradesh which requires that religious conversions for marriage in Uttar Pradesh to be approved by a district magistrate are symbolic and crystallisation of everyday vigilantism within a democratic setting. Islamic organisations on the other end of the spectrum are increasingly becoming puritarian and communal in their prescriptions and practices. Consequently, in West Bengal, TMC is also finding it easier to assume a communal form rather than a secular and democratic form of governance. Because of such polarised nature of the public sphere, relatively secular forces including the LF and Congress are finding it difficult to carve out any significant political space.

Everyday vigilantism should be seen as a form of governmentality. It occupies an unclear position in addressing the dialectics of state and people in governance. Instead of the state machineries regulating people's behaviour, in India, especially after 2014, it is the cultural fronts resorting to the puritarian tendencies and is creating constraints and facilities to shape people's behaviour through subjective channels like self-image, power relations and identity (Ferguson, 1986; Foucault, 1988; Hume, 1987; Hirschman, 1977; Oestreich, 1982; Elias, 1978, 1982). Foucault (1978) and Pocock (1985) explain the contest of ethical self, political self and economic (capitalist) self as the state uses political techniques to make the self understand the greatness of the state and happiness of its subjects (Burchell, 1991). It is the ethical and political self that merged to form one, channelised through the political use of cultural misrecognitions. Vigilantism installed through riots, lynching and Love Jihad, to name a few have become political techniques ingrained through the structural state apparatuses and creating a lasting impact on the subjective and cognitive issues like internalisation of political identity and authority relations among the public sphere at large (Burchell, 1991; Foucault, 1978; Pocock, 1985).

Based on my multi-sited ethnographies on the proliferation of Hindu-tva and Islamic fundamentalism in a democratic setting and their interface with politics, I have unravelled several qualitative dimensions of the politics-culture-violence interplay, its impact and mechanisms of further proliferation. In the following section, I re-emphasise them.

First, the unchecked spread of identity-inclined organisations and their activities have successfully occupied an organisation vacuum after the LF has lost and their party organisation was replaced by misrecognition-based, administration-driven hyper development

mechanism. This was a conscious attempt from the TMC to make the public sphere relatively free from the robust and all-encompassing reach of the LF party machinery. As noted by Ray et al. (2018), Ray (2020), Ray and Dutta (2017) and Nath (2018, 2020a), such a vacuum has resulted in the unchecked growth of organisations in other forms. People from across the political spectrum have joined such organisations often with a misconception that these are “cultural” fronts. While RSS has capitalised the most out of this vacuum, Islamic organisations also have expanded their organisation base among Muslims. It was only natural for these grassroots organisations to incline towards a political ally. As RSS and BJP find a convergence of their interests throughout the country like never before, TMC became Muslims’ new protector. Consequently, we witness communal violence is replacing partisan violence.

Second, these organisations over the years have framed the normative, regulative and cognitive dimensions to leave a lasting impact on everyday life of the people in West Bengal. It is these three dimensions that have disciplined a considerably large proportion of people to think along the sectarian line of thought. Such disciplining has installed a self-surveillance and vigilant mindset. Consequently, people now subscribe to the notions like their religion is in danger, their rulers are motivated by particular religious doctrine and principles excluding the others and that every violence is seen as mutually exclusive and hence alienating.

Third, disciplining along the identity faultline is inevitably connected with formation and propagation of ideal prototypes. Therefore, there is an attempt to create ideal Hindu and ideal Muslim. Any deviation from such prototypes is not sanctioned and actions are taken in places like Rejinagar.

Fourth, a strategic use of invented traditions has resulted in displacement of relatively open and multiple traditions to the formation of Hindu and Islamic monolith. The continuation and regularisation of Ganga Aarati and spectacle of Ram Navami have far-reaching impact across the state. Temple and shrine-based local organisations have made the avenue for such spectacles. While TMC continued to extend support to the formation of Islamic monolith with Sharia and other puritarian sects, they have either failed to recognise or undermined the parallel rise of an aggressive Ram and Hanuman cult. These are now the most conspicuous shrines which traditionally belonged to localised forms of Kali, Shitala and trident symbolising Lord Shiva. As Figure 8.1 shows, the Hanuman idol is a new addition to the existing shrine of Lord Shiva and Kali. The idol is saffron in colour and over time such shrines in other places have over the time became saffron in colour and a shed is built to protect the Hanuman idol.



Figure 8.1 A Hanuman idol being kept at a roadside shrine at Kolkata Airport Gate No. 2.

Fifth, there is an association of aggressive masculinity connecting mythical past, hypernationalistic present and a requirement of protection of Hindu people, especially the women in present and in near future. Bike rallies, Jai Shree Ram sloganeering, anti-Pakistan and Muslim sentiments and Durga Shakti women asking brothers to protect them from Muslims have become the hallmark of the rise of Hindutva politics in West Bengal. Islamic groups too have reciprocated in a similar way. Their aggressive rallies, Jalsha programmes, implementation of fatwa and vigilantism have an equally aggressive male voice of control and violence. Interestingly, both of these have attracted large crowds, who actively engage in such discourses and discipline themselves.

Sixth, if we see Hindutva and Islam as two poles through our present experience of what is happening in West Bengal, there are several in-between arrays of syncretic traditions. These traditions have

contributed in many ways to the co-existence of the two seemingly opposing traditions. Hindu–Muslim everyday interaction, exchange and syncretic faiths have held the fabric of diversity together. Party during the LF period only played a superficial forestalling mechanism to stop conflicts to go out of control. To construct the Hindutva and Islamic monoliths, organisations from both ends have increasingly engulfed the syncretic practices. These relatively open spiritual and religious spaces are rapidly being converted into the monoliths which are not only destroying hundreds of folk traditions but also exclusionary and violence prone.

Seventh, the post-truth moment has made it really difficult to distinguish between fake and real, narratives and truth, facts and fictions. Some of the major functions that repeated spreading of false information do include a) to subvert the truthfulness of facts, b) to use confirmation bias of the people and make people emotionally motivated about a particular issue, c) to establish lie as an “alternative” fact carrying emotional appeal and finally, d) to completely dissolve the boundaries between the true and false, fact and belief and reality and fantasy. This particular condition has been repeatedly used not only to manufacture riots but also to keep a sense of insecurity and vulnerability among people (Mcintyre, 2018). I see post-truth as a uniquely developed structural phenomenon that is designed to serve among the others the purpose of politico-religious polarisation in India. It began with cultivating Hindu–Muslim divide with messages filled with morphed images and chilling videos of atrocities. These videos were collections from different formal media sources which aired such images or videos as news items at different times. Some are directly copied from Hindi movies including some of the popular movies like *Bombay* which portrayed a riot (Nath and Ray, forthcoming). As Chaturvedi (2019) notes, BJP’s IT cell has championed in using the post-truth moment to polarise people, silence dissenting voices and bag electoral benefits out of the consolidation of majoritarian sentiments.

Finally, there is a strong impact of all these issues and mechanisms of polarisation over the cognitive dimensions of people at large. The use of saffron in RSS, Durga Shakti or other organisations parallel to the use of the same colour in decking the Ganga Aarati venue, the Ram Navami rally, local shrines and temples and finally the saffron in BJP’s flags and their workers’ outfits has made it easier for the people to connect and comprehend the sheer size and reach of the saffron brigade everywhere. Over time, the colour has played an important role not only as a community feeling generating machinery but also as a regulative and normative mechanism of integration and exclusion. So, an average Hindu carrying even slightest communal sentiment would be easily dragged to this large corpus of people. Saffron in Ram Navami

may appear as a “protecting” force for the Hindus; it simply carries an aggressive statement to Muslims in a process of inclusion. Green happens to be their colour. The Islamic beard, fez, green decked rally and Islamic flags are playing a similar mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Use of Islamic flags in Islamic Jalsa, the green colour in decoration and beard and religious Muslims wearing fez is a prominent marker that becomes aggressive in Muharram rallies, or during their visit to shrines like Furfura Sharif as they chant “Nara e Takbeer” and Allah-hu-Akbar.

The symbolic nature of the polarisation politics can be seen as sediments of social order. There is no question of consent as we see in Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, but it is the “misrecognition” embedded within the habitus that promotes increasing polarisation (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu (1984) sees the habitus as an outcome of a conflict between relatively powerful and relatively powerless for prestige and status to form a tacit knowledge. The powerful narrative gets reified as “natural” and thus manages to define or redefine right and wrong, truth and falsehood. When the dominant narrative was party machinery, it was reified and carried normative and regulative capacities. With political change and an attempt to dismantle the party-based governance over the years, as the dominant discourse started to revolve around the primordial identity sentiments, this divisive everydayness is becoming regular and reified. We can see the polarisation and the replacement of partisan violence by communal violence as an outcome of the “cultural misrecognition” practices both by the TMC and by the BJP through state and grassroots organisation support, respectively. The majoritarianism has strategically utilised partition-led riot memories and has created further fresh memories to bring back the communal selfhood among common people, something, which became irrelevant in the three and half decades of LF rule. If we attempt to summarise the three domains of the rise of fundamentalism as discussed throughout the book, we can get something like Table 8.1.

The fundamentalist forces have created a situation where a) riots and riot memories have come alive along with b) mutual avoidance and consolidation of community sentiments which have resulted in c) politico-religious alignment of two. This has not only driven out the secular democratic forces out of the socio-political spectrum but also made their line of arguments irrelevant, unappealing and outdated. There seems to be a desperate change in the policy domain by the ruling TMC as the state was heading towards assembly election 2021. TMC-led state government has resumed its public service delivery-led politics through political machinery like “Didike Balo” – Tell your elder sister – Mamata Banerjee, the CM about the problems you face through a customer care model and administrative machinery like Duare Sarkar, Government at your door to speed up serviced to be

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Table 8.1 Three domains of the rise of fundamentalism in West Bengal

	<i>Narratives</i>	<i>Symbolic domain</i>	<i>Practice domain</i>	<i>Political domain</i>
Islamic fundamentalism	Hypersensitive Islamic feelings like Islam is under attack Nabi under attack. Muslims are intentionally excluded	Mosque, Namaaz, Green and Islamic flags, beard and fez Nara-e-Takbeer	Fatwa Everyday distancing Conversion of Syncretic spaces into monolithic Islamic practices including Idgah, mosque, Madrasa, etc. Riots and counter attack Vigilantism Moral policing	Organising Mostly under the TMC. Some with traditional Congress base. New emergence of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen
Hindu Fundamentalism	Hindus are in danger Muslims are converting the state into an Islamic state State government is pro-Islamic	Saffron flags Jai Shree Ram Several invented traditions	Everyday distancing Proliferation of temples Invented traditions Riots and counter attack Vigilantism Moral policing	Organising under BJP

delivered to the people. This, for a democratic republic, is a welcome change in the politics of hatred and riot. Meanwhile, the vibrancy of the civil society organisations through social movements like #NoVotetoBJP has shown that an alternative politics is still possible within the democratic sphere. However, it is doubtful if the desperate attempt to recast public attention towards the “real issues” from the “misrecognitions” will be successful in the long run. Although TMC has managed a consecutive third term with a huge mandate, BJP has also climbed up from their 3 to 77 assembly seats. LF and Congress will remain outside of the Assembly at least for the next five years. It appears that West Bengal will continue to witness religious polarisation through a variety of machineries I have discussed in the book. Identity issue is not going to go backstage anytime soon.

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